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MAGAZINE
NAPOLEON SOLO · ILLYA KURYAKIN

NOVEMBER, 1967 VOL. 4, NO. 4

NEW FULL LENGTH U.N.C.L.E. NOVEL

THE VOLCANO BOX AFFAIR

by ROBERT HART DAVIS

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No man was safe, no land could withstand the terrible power contained in a frightened man's Frankenstein weapon, as Solo and Illya take a one-way journey into hell to seek the ray which could take a peaceful city—and turn it overnight into a seething death trap!

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THE VOLCANO BOX AFFAIR

THE NEW COMPLETE "U.N.C.L.E." NOVEL

Deep inside the earth THRUSH had found a molten weapon to enslave mankind, as Solo and Illya, alone and marked for extermination, seek the one man who had discovered how to turn any city in the world into a red death trap.

by ROBERT HART DAVIS

ACT I—ISLAND OF THE LOST

THEY LOOKED LIKE a pair of prehistoric animals as they emerged from the testing room, but the weird beaklike noses and bug eyes were actually the components of ordinary gas masks.

They removed these and set them down on a table.

The darker and heftier of the two shook his head in wonder. "I don't see how such a tiny amount of liquid could create so much smoke. You'd think a city block were on fire."

Illya Kuryakin grinned pontifically. He said: "It's not the liquid so much as the gas it liberates, which reacts with the metals it touches and creates more gas and smoke, which in turn react with the metals they touch and create—"

"Okay. I get the picture," Napoleon Solo said, gesturing with his thumb and index finger as if to turn off a broken record. "Well, this little capsule ought to come in handy if it doesn't get us arrested for air pollution violations. In fact, I'd say

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STARRING

NAPOLEON SOLO and ILLYA KURYAKIN

it's a real gasser." He looked at Illya for approval.

"Is that really what you'd say?" the blond young man said, putting his jacket on over his snug black vest.

Napoleon's reply was interrupted by the sound of the public address system crackling: there was about to be an announcement. It turned out to be Alexander Waverly's secretary, paging Napoleon Solo and Illya Kuryakin.

They proceeded through a labyrinth of corridors, up a silent elevator, and through another maze of passages, at each checkpoint flashing their identification, though they were well known by face to the guards. Such was the scope of security precautions in this most important law enforcement agency in the free world.

Waverly's back was turned on them when they entered his office. His suit fitted somewhat loosely on his broad shoulders. But that hunch of his back was deceptive, for he was an extremely powerful man and as quick on his feet as a man in his business had to be to survive as long as Waverly had survived.

The head of North American Operations for U.N.C.L.E. was looking at a map of the world which had pins of numerous colors jutting out of a great diversity of locations. The pins were of course coded, each color corresponding to some discernible pattern of crime or trouble around the world—light blue for smuggling, dark blue for white slavery, red for suspected sabotage, and so forth.

In his left hand he held a sheaf of bulletins, releases, newspaper and magazine clippings and data sheets, and they were color-coded dark green.

Napoleon Solo and Illya Kuryakin glanced at the map but could not at first see any pinheads corresponding to the color of Waverly's papers. Then they both noticed a lonely pair of green dots thrust into the Indonesian area, almost imperceptible, due to the company they kept—a riot of pins indicating smuggling, dope traffic, murder, espionage, sabotage, political chicanery, kidnaping, and syndicated crime corresponding to every hue in the rainbow.

Southeast Asia was about the hottest spot on the globe when it came to evil-doing, but the two green pins in the midst of all the others suggested that whatever this new form of evil was, it was only in its incipient stage.

Waverly was tapping the map with his pipe, unaware that flakes of tobacco were falling out of it and covering his arm and shoulder. Napoleon cleared his throat and Waverly dropped his arm, sending a shower of tobacco down to the carpet. He wrinkled his nose. "What is that smell?"

"Smoke, sir," Napoleon said, looking a bit sheepish. "We've been experimenting with bithane gas.

Most potent tear gas I've ever seen."

"I wish you'd have your clothing deodorized before coming into this office," Waverly said, grinning. "People will think I've been smoking some rotten weed." He dipped an almost black briar pipe into his humidor, and as he tamped tobacco into the bowl he gestured with the pipe in the direction of the map. "I expected you gentlemen know something about geology."

The agents nodded cautiously.

"You'll observe two green pins located in the Banda Sea area, southeast of the main Indonesian group. These represent the two volcanoes that have erupted there recently. Both have received ample publicity, so I don't have to fill you in on their havoc. In case you haven't followed the press releases carefully, you'll find complete descriptions in the information I'll provide you with at the end of our briefing."

He dropped a green manila folder marked *Newspaper Clippings* on his desk.

"A volcano can occur anywhere on earth. It is the result of molten lava, which presumably occupies the core of our planet, rushing to fill faults in the earth and, if that fault extends to the surface as frequently happens during an earthquake, overflowing. Because such faults exist in greater concentrations in some places on the globe than in others, we can expect more activity in those places.

The complete novels depicting the amazing adventures of Napoleon Solo and Illya Kuryakin and the rest of the famous cast of characters making up the great organization known as United Network Command for Law and Enforcement—are especially written, entirely brand-new and inspired by the tremendously exciting MGM-ARENA popular television series—"THE MAN FROM U.N.C.L.E."

"The islands around the Pacific Ocean are the most vulnerable earthquake and volcano zones, and from Hawaii to Japan such subsurface disturbances are common. Therefore it should ordinarily be of no concern to a law-enforcement agency that a volcano or two erupt somewhere on earth, as obviously the only laws we cannot try to enforce are those of nature."

He patted his pockets as if looking for a match, then rummaged around the notes and papers on his desk while his pipe hung unlit from his mouth. Apparently he forgot what he was looking for a moment later, and removed the pipe from his mouth to use it simply as a visual aid in emphasizing his lecture.

"However," Waverly went on, "U.N.C.L.E. has some grounds to suspect that the two recent volcanoes, the first on an uninhabited island numbered L four hundred and six on navigation charts, the second, quite tragically, on a fairly well-populated island called Tapwana, are not acts of God, but rather acts of man. Let me modify that. The first of the two eruptions

could have been natural, but the second is most suspect."

Napoleon Solo had begun frowning and looking off to an indeterminate spot in mid-air as if his mind was groping for an idea. Then his eyes seemed to catch fire, and he said "Tapwana. Isn't that the island that was making all that trouble for the Boruvian Federation?" He turned to Illya for support.

Illya Kuryakin picked up the thread immediately. "Right. That dictator of Borua—what's his name?—Sarabando—lined up all the islands in his area into a federation, but this Tapwana refused to join. A month later it was immaterial, because Tapwana was melted down into volcano-fodder. But sir, you don't think that a volcano—"

Waverly cleared his throat, as if reprimanding his agent for drawing hasty conclusions. "Sarabando, the dictator of the Boruvian Federation, is a known puppet of THRUSH, Mr. Solo. And although that still leaves considerable room for coincidence, there is one more circumstance which pushes this matter very solidly into U.N.C.L.E.'s sphere of influence."

Alexander Waverly, enjoying his moment, lingered over it by fiddling with the mouthpiece of his pipe.

"Who is Edward Dacian?" he asked, like a teacher trying to catch his pupils unprepared with a surprise test.

TWO

NAPOLEON AND ILLYA pursed their lips and for a second or two appeared to be stumped. But they were only vacating the room mentally, as it were, and sending their minds into a vast filing system of data in order to retrieve a full dossier on the man their commanding officer had mentioned.

Illya's face showed he had come back with the facts first, but Napoleon spoke. "Dr. Edward Dacian. Scientist, working at some laboratory in Texas. Oh yes, I remember. He was experimenting with the application of laser technology to mining operations." Napoleon turned to Illya for a hand. What one didn't know, the other usually did.

"It wasn't only mining," the slim blond Russian said. "It was drilling as well. He was using lasers to penetrate the earth's surface. I think an oil concern had him under contract."

Although Waverly had the information at his fingertips, he usually refrained from coaching his agents during briefing sessions. On the grounds that an agent learns to swim if the alternative is sinking, he always let his people flounder and thrash, using their memory and wits to get them out of trouble. If he gave them too many cues he would only injure them in the long run, for they would come to rely more on him than on their own re-

sources. Thus he held his tongue as his two star agents batted Dacian's life back and forth until they got the facts straight.

"No," Napoleon Solo contradicted his companion, "it wasn't oil. I think it was—yes, it definitely was an electric power company."

Illya's normally cool facade became animated with the excitement of recognition. "Right! Now I remember. This power and light combine had set Dacian to work to drill deep into the earth's mantle with his laser instrument. As they penetrated it they'd of course approach the hot material in the core. At a certain level the heat would be so intense it would turn water to steam. So if Dr. Dacian were to drill, say, on the ocean floor or through the bed of a big river, the hole would be perpetually filled with water, which in turn would be converted into steam, like those geysers in Yellowstone Park."

"And the company that hired Dacian saw this steam as a simple and cheap mode of energy," Napoleon added. "All they had to do was harness it to generate all the power they needed."

Waverly's bloodhound face wrinkled in the semblance of a dim smile of appreciation. "Very good, gentlemen. But there is one major fact you've been withholding."

Napoleon Solo grinned. "We've saved the best for last."

"Well, get on with it; I'm a busy man," their chief growled.

"Dacian disappeared about six months ago," Napoleon said.

The trio held silence for a few moments as the threads Waverly had been weaving came together to form a distinct and sinister pattern. It fell on Napoleon to summarize the situation.

"So you believe," he said to Waverly, "that THRUSH abducted Dacian, and somehow coerced him to create for them the device he'd been working on in Texas. And now THRUSH is using that device to blackmail governments. The first one to feel the blow was Tapwana."

"That's correct. The volcano that preceded Tapwana's, the one on that unpopulated island, was probably experimental. Having proved the device worked, they applied it to Tapwana. I don't believe that Tapwana was that vital to THRUSH politically; rather, THRUSH used the device to warn other governments of its immense power in the form of Dacian's device.

"I have no doubt that every government in the world can expect soon to hear from THRUSH with a blackmail message. The forces on our planet, as a result of this situation, are distinctly unbalanced, and must be restored as soon as possible. So let me give you your assignments."

He turned to Napoleon first. "I would like you to proceed to Borua, the island where dictator Sarabando reigns. Fortunately for us April Dancer and Mark Slate just completed an assignment in Hong Kong three days ago. I might add it was eminently successful," Waverly said with a smile of gratification. "Mark left immediately for London, but April, after checking with me, had plans to stay on at the Hong Kong Hilton for a short rest which she highly deserved."

Waverly's expression changed suddenly. "However, before the poor girl had a chance to relax, we received the shocking news that our U.N.C.L.E. director of operations in Singapore, Harry Gray, had been mysteriously stabbed to death. This is a great loss to us, for as you two know, Gray was a key agent in our Indonesian area. And most important now, Gray had valuable information on the Boruvian Federation and the scientist Dr. Dacian. Because of this crisis in the Singapore headquarters, April has been ordered to go there. She's been helping Joe Kingsley, who worked under Harry Gray, and now she's investigating in Borua. She knows enough for you to proceed, I believe, in your usual sagacious manner, Mr. Solo."

Napoleon Solo gazed at Illya and smiled broadly. "I'll be looking forward to working with one of our best girl agents, April Dancer. Glad she took over for Harry."

Waverly handed a neat typewritten report to Solo. "She's informed fully about the THRUSH threat in the Boruvian Federation. Study this en route."

"Yes sir. So we are to try to track down Dr. Dacian and his machine?"

"Yes. It will be difficult and dangerous. If Dacian has been eliminated by THRUSH, get all copies of his formula, all volcano devices in existence. Concentrate, too, in discovering anyone there who knows the technique of Dr. Dacian's treacherous device. In this end, Mr. Solo, I believe luck may be with us."

"How so?"

"I don't believe Dacian has spilled the formula. If he had, we'd have gotten our blackmail notices long ago. He is obviously being coerced to make one machine at a time, and is doing so reluctantly, slowly. But THRUSH will get that formula sooner or later, and you'll have to work fast.

"Illya," he said, turning to Napoleon's colleague, "you are to proceed to Gulf Coast Power and Light laboratories in Texas. There you

are to work with the officers and scientists, both to learn everything you can about the process Dacian was working on, and, if you can, about suspicious persons who might give us some clue as to Dacian's present unknown whereabouts.

"In addition, I want you to work with them to develop a device which can detect Dr. Dacian's machine from a distance and destroy it. You have Gulf Coast's promise of full cooperation, to say nothing of our government's."

The agents exchanged glances, then turned their eyes back to Waverly's, who gazed at them sadly. "You're to report to me on any development, large or small, and as soon as we're on the trail of Dacian and his abductors I'll have you join forces to make the kill. Any questions?"

Waverly's question was answered with silence.

"Very well, then," he said, turning the files over to them, "be on your way. You haven't a moment to lose. Study this information immediately, then speak to Transportation about the arrangements that have been made for your departure."

Napoleon Solo and Illya Kuryakin whirled on their heels and retreated from Waverly's office.

"Volcanoes," Illya muttered laconically.

"One of our hotter assignments," Napoleon said.

ACT II
ISLES OF HELL

SOUTHEAST of Celebes in the Indonesian Islands is the Banda Sea, a rich blue expanse of water that might be described as a lake within an ocean. It lies, almost like a stupendous crater, in the center of a crescent of volcanic islands to its south and a semi-circle of massive string of isles and atolls to the north.

Because of its partially protected position the sea escapes the rough handling of open ocean storms, but typhoons sweeping it in the season radiate their havoc from its axis and dash immense destructive waves on the shores of the many islands around its perimeter.

Inside the Banda a cluster of islands rear their craggy summits towards shrouds of cottony mist. Some of these islands, collectively known as the Lucipara group, are inhabited.

The gentle but hardy Sino-Polynesian folk, whose presence in this territory dates back to man's first attempts to explore the world beyond his shores, gather fish and fruit without effort and sustain their existence peacefully as they've done since pre-history.

Other islands here are desolate, however, for all attempts at animal and vegetable life to cling and flourish on their hostile stone precipes have been defeated. Moss, molluscs and sea-birds populate

them and practically nothing more.

It therefore must have puzzled these primitive denizens to see erected, on one of these forbidding isles, a scaffolding of steel very much resembling an oil rig. The island was nameless, though navigational charts numbered it if for no other reason than to prevent ships from cracking their hulls against its rocky facade.

But from the activity going on in the vicinity of the rig, the island might have been thought of as a super-civilized one. A handful of helicopters stood parked on the gentle but barren slope to the west of the rig, while on its east stood two strange igloo-like structures. These had been constructed out of aluminum frames covered with light canvas sprayed heavily with foam.

The foam, upon hardening almost instantly, provided airtight protection against the elements, yet was porous enough to permit ordinary handsaws to slice doors and windows out of it.

These had been covered with transparent plastic.

Closer examination of these huts disclosed banks of highly sophisticated electronic gear, powered by generators and batteries. On slowly-moving charts the needles of half a dozen sensors and recording devices traced straight or jagged lines whose significance was opaque to the rather belligerent Orientals who guarded the machinery jealously, Sten-guns at the ready.

It was a partially cloudy afternoon, but the clouds swept through rather than over the island, creating a miserable mist that caused the knot of men standing around the rig to pull their tropical shirts away from their chests, as if the saturated cloth threatened to shrink on them and crush their rib cages.

The individuals watching the operation of the drilling gear were for the most part Orientals, grim-faced and furtive. From time to time one or another would look over his shoulder, as if he were doing something wrong and expected pursuers somehow to materialize unannounced.

Others shifted uneasily from foot to foot, appearing nervous about the safety of the machinery before them. They glanced frequently at the helicopters, reassuring themselves that their choppers were ready to bear them off instantaneously and without a hitch when the right moment came.

In this crowd of sallow, stolid men the short, redheaded white man stood out almost ludicrously. He was just five-and-a-half feet tall, matching the height of most of his Oriental colleagues. But unlike them his head bore close-cropped orange-red hair and his skin had the milky white complexion that frequently accompanies hair of that color. He was about fifty, thin almost to emaciation, and wore

olive drab Bermuda shorts and shirt.

His face, like theirs, was unsmiling, but instead of expressing objective scientific curiosity he seemed almost to dread the experiment unfolding before him. The fact that one of the members of the crowd trained a Sten on the base of his spine might explain his decided lack of enthusiasm over the project.

TWO

THE ONLY PERSON with any semblance of amusement in his countenance was a stocky Oriental, quite tall for his race, who observed both rig and captive with a kind of smugness. His almond eyes dilated with satisfaction as he contemplated the event unfolding before him, and he seemed to carry no doubt whatsoever that success was within his grasp.

He was a barrel-chested man, with powerful arms and a squat neck that seemed to be all tendon. He wore white slacks and a bizarre Hawaiian shirt of red and green design, almost the only evidence of color on the entire island.

The rig they watched had the pyramidal shape of a typical drilling device, but was considerably shorter. There were no pipes, however, and no drill heads. Nor were there tubes or other apparatus to collect or store whatever it was these men were drilling for. And instead of conventional machinery, gas driven motors and water pumps and the like, a small cubical device stood over the shaft.

The device was about four feet square and encased in grey metal. From one side emerged a bundle of wires and electric cables that fed into a generator unit housed in one of the foam huts. And in the belly of this box was what seemed to be a zoom lens not unlike that of a camera.

Amid the sounds of waves pounding the rocks, and sea birds calling stridently to one another, came the throaty murmur of the generator and a sinister humming of the device itself. From time to time the mist surrounding the rig would be pierced by a bright shaft of purple light radiating from the lens, after which the air would be filled with an intense odor of ozone that hung in the heavy mist and rankled the observers' nostrils.

As this strange operation progressed, the stocky Oriental in the Hawaiian shirt moved through the little crowd and stood by the side of the redheaded white man. Si-

lently they watched the process, but at last the Oriental addressed his companion.

"Forty-eight hours have come, Dr. Dacian, and forty-eight have passed."

"I said forty-eight, give or take a few hours. The exact length of time depends on the structure of the mantle, and the composition of the stone at the critical level. We have no way of knowing these facts except by inference. That is, if the beam penetrates and destroys the stone at a certain rate we know it's working on a certain material, and so on.

"We can also deduce the density of the mantle roughly, by relying on two factors. One is the changing relationship of echoes rebounding from the solid rock of the mantle and the molten mass of magma underneath it. The other, of course, is the increasing temperature as the drilling operation destroys the rock that stands between the magma and —us."

"I understand all this," said the Oriental, "except for one thing. If you cannot determine accurately the critical moment, how do we know that you might not err on the side of lateness rather than on that of earliness?"

Dr. Dacian smiled, for the first time that day. "My dear Kae Soong, since my invention was intended only for approaching the lava beneath man's feet, rather than striking into it, I have to confess again that I am not sure. As I've shown you, the machinery in that hut"—he nodded towards a small foam igloo to the left of the generator house—"is monitoring all developments, and is programmed to signal us as the drill approaches a heat level of volcanic intensity.

"From my experience and knowledge in geology, which I assure you is considerable, I think I can determine with ample room for error the crucial level. But because there are flaws in the earth's mantle which are impossible to detect with the relatively crude instruments at our disposal, it's possible that we could break through far earlier than we'd expected."

The Oriental frowned. "In which case—"

Dacian's smile broadened proportionately as Kae Soong's frown darkened. "In which case my device, to use a colorful American expression, would blow us all to hell."

Kae Soong pursed his lips and threw a sidelong glance at his helicopters.

"I am counting on your fear of death to prevent it," he said.

"I'm not a hero, true," the redhead said lugubriously. "But I'm not clairvoyant either. Because I want to live, because I hope to escape, because I hope to see you dead, and because I'm frankly curious to see what my device is going to do, I've done my best to

insure that the experiment goes successfully.

"But because I'm only human, and therefore fallible, I can offer you no guarantees. And if I'm wrong, destruction will come so quickly that I'll have no time to face it, bravely or cowardly. But this talk has made me nervous. Let's take a look at the monitors."

Kae Soong looked all too relieved to accompany the scientists to the hut where the sensors and recording apparatus stood. Behind them stood Dacian's guard, the muzzle of his gun leveled perpetually at the man's back, while on either side other surly soldiers held their guns in readiness as well.

Before them a broad-graphed tape slowly passed beneath six inked needles. As Dacian was about to point to the first needle his captor held back his arm and said, "Let me see if I have learned my lessons. This needles indicates temperature at the base of the shaft. This red line is the critical temperature. We seem to be almost there, yes?"

"Yes."

"And this needle records depth. The black marks you have made here indicate your guess as to the depth at which a breakthrough can be expected, is that correct?"

"Let's just say it's the level beyond which we'd be foolish to stick around."

"Quite," said Kae Soong. "And these needles record various aspects of the laser's operation. They do not seem to be fluctuating very much. I gather that means the pulse is steady and satisfactory."

Dacian nodded. "You're a good student, Kae Soong. I hope to have the pleasure of abducting you one day, to return the compliment you've paid me."

"I'm afraid I'm nowhere near as valuable to you as you are to me. But tell me, why is this needle not moving at all? It's recording a perfectly straight line."

"Let's hope it continues to do so," Dacian said. "Because when it begins to squiggle it will indicate approximately ten seconds of life left for us on earth. It's really a superfluous needle, but as I had nothing important to record with it I thought it would be amusing to convert it into a seismograph of sorts. After all, I don't see why you should have all the fun."

"I do," said Kae Soong, placing his chunky thumb and index finger on the delicate pen and bending it up, so that it looked like the needle of a scorpion poised to strike. "What would you estimate zero hour to be now?" he asked.

Dacian studied the chart carefully for a minute or two. "I suggest you order the team to board the helicopters in one hour. The flight should then proceed"—he glanced at an instrument and took a reading on wind direction—"due west so that the debris is blown away from it. The choppers should

hover at a fairly high level about three miles from here. I would guess that the exact moment will come at four forty-one, give or take —" he chuckled, wringing out of misfortune as much amusement as possible "—three or four hours."

Kae Soong squirmed perceptibly. "Do not joke, Dacian. How much leeway is there?"

"Two minutes on either side," he said as the guards, taking their cue from the agitation in Soong's voice, shifted their feet and brought their guns to readiness.

They emerged from the hut and headed back to the site of the laser drill. In the period in which they had been away an eerie phenomenon had begun to occur over the device. The immense heat from the shaft, as the beam struck deeper and deeper towards the lava beneath the earth's mantle, rose with almost violent speed and sent the mist swirling into the sky so turbulently it looked as if they were standing on the rim of a cauldron.

"Won't the heat destroy the machine?" Soong asked nervously.

"No," the scientist assured him. "The metals will resist heat well into the crucial temperature, and so will the lens of the laser. I'm not sure I can say as much for the flesh of your friends, however. They look a bit under the weather."

The observers turned to the returning men, hoping for some instruction that would galvanize them into preparation to leave this accursed island and its monstrous experiment.

Kae Soong pronounced a series of commands and the group broke into a babble. Then they trotted away from the ominous device at the center of the saucer-shaped clearing, gathering their belongings and making last-moment preparations to record the effects of the ensuing climax.

One by one the blades of the helicopters began to spin, swirling through the steam mist and adding an even more diabolic cast to the atmosphere than before. The island seemed to be shrouded in steam, and nothing but the occasional flashes of purple light from the laser penetrated the grey haze.

The heat was rising rapidly, and the few birds that ventured over the shaft were borne upward in a violent thermal and deposited, roasted, in the sea.

Suddenly a warning bell went off, indicating that the apparatus was entering the final phase. The members of the team, some half blind with fear and others half blinded by the mist and steam, started to bolt towards the helicopters but bumped into each other or tripped over material on the ground.

"You said an hour remained," Kae Soong said angrily to Dacian as they hustled towards their helicopter.

"Oh, we still have forty-five

minutes, but I guess I miscalculated the ability of the human system to cope with so much heat and so much fear."

"If I had the formula for that device I wouldn't have the slightest compunction about leaving you here," Soong said.

"I'm sure you'll wring it out of me in due time," the redhead answered.

They rushed to their helicopter, followed by Dacian's guard, and the machine raised them off the ground instantaneously. They kept the starboard door open so that they could watch the final moment of the experiment. Clouds of steam roiled like giant waves into the cabin, instantly soaking everything within and almost choking the inhabitants.

As soon as the helicopter was clear of the crag on the north side of the island it tilted due west and raced away from the site as if the clouds of hot mist were tentacles intent on gathering all of them back in and feeding them to the dreadful belching maw of this island-monster.

After a moment six helicopters emerged from the billows and proceeded on a westerly course, gaining altitude as they gained distance. After a few minutes they halted and began hovering at the point where Dacian had suggested. What seemed an inordinate length of time passed, and because of the mist that shrouded the entire island group it was impossible to see the specific isle on which the device stood.

But the turbulence over that spot marked it clearly, and though they were now well out of the danger zone, the temperature in the helicopter rose as the clock approached 4.41.

All eyes were fixed on the site, and at around 4.35 the white clouds began to turn brown, then black while an ominous red glow illuminated the spot where their binoculars were focussed.

Suddenly the glow deepened to bright orange, and in another moment a titanic fireball swelled up from the island, throwing great pieces of white-hot rock and pumice into the sky. For several seconds the air around the site cleared completely as the heat vaporized the mist.

In those seconds was disclosed the awesome spectacle of a volcano being born. The crags of the island were no more, and in their place seethed a fiery mass of molten lava, from the center of which radiated great waves of white-capped water. Then the lava spilled out over the rim of its crater and sent gigantic plumes and gysers of steam thousands of feet into the air.

The rumble of material pouring from the world's bowels, the searing hiss of ocean converted into steam, the orange river of magma flowing into the sea, and the stench

of sulphur resembled nothing less than a nightmare out of Dante.

Edward Dacian, who had thought he knew what to expect, sat stupefied, his mouth open. The rest of the team stared in almost humble silence. Only Kae Soong appeared fully calm. He gazed, eyes wide with pleasure and lips drawn in a smile of satisfaction, at the product of the most potent weapon ever created.

"It occurred at four thirty-eight, not four forty-one," he finally remarked to his captive as the helicopters turned away from the first man-made volcano ever created.

"Nobody's perfect," Dacian explained.

ACT III
FOR SALE—DEATH

ALTHOUGH THREE people were waiting ahead of him, the bony man was admitted as soon as he announced himself to the secretary.

"This way, Mr. Rawlings. Mr. Greyling has been expecting you." The petite girl, her red jumper shifting provocatively as she led him down a corridor, had been most eager to accommodate him. She thrust open the door to Mr. Greyling's office and bade him pass before her.

She led the bony guest into an inner office and introduced him to its occupant, a squat, florid man with crew-cut grey hair and a too-ingratiating, almost fatuous grin. They shook hands and both Greyling and his secretary tripped over each other to help their guest into his seat.

"You'll let me offer you something, won't you? Buy you breakfast, perhaps?" Greyling said to his guest.

"I don't think so," Rawlings said. "Suppose we get right down to business."

"Fine, fine. Couldn't ask for anything more. That's the way I like to do things. Roll up your sleeves and plunge right in."

Greyling spread his lips in an almost leering grin. Then his eyes focussed on the thin grey scar on the left side of Rawlings' brow. It was an interesting wound, but Greyling decided it was best to say nothing about it. Greyling had a weird-shaped war wound on his belly and didn't mind talking about it, but some folks are funny about these things. The deal was too important to risk offending this character.

"Well," said Greyling, "as I understand it, you're interested in the Sperber property. If you don't mind my saying so, you're a very shrewd man indeed, Mr. Rawlings. Fifteen years ago, that bunch of oil wells promised to be the biggest producer in Oklahoma, maybe even in the southwest. But the men who tapped the well were after the fast buck. Know what I mean?

"They just wanted to skim the

surface oil, raise it by means of the gas pocket down that hole, and when the gas fizzled out they didn't care a hoot for building a rig to pump the rest of the stuff out. So as far as anyone knows, there's a mighty big pool of black gold sitting under the Sperber property waiting for the right man to invest a little dough and bring it up."

He looked into Rawlings faded blue eyes for a sign of greed—the dilated pupil, the glazed stare he had seen so often as he began to weave one of his preposterous stories to hook the real estate sucker.

But no such change came over Rawlings' countenance. It remained calm and almost dispassionate. The bony man had simply nodded politely as Greyling did his spiel, and then looked at him blankly when the speech was over.

Greyling began to wonder. The guy didn't really seem to care what story he told him; he was, as he'd announced on the phone, desirous of buying the Sperber property and didn't need to be sold on it. Well then, Greyling said to himself, don't try to sell the guy on it, otherwise you may sell yourself right out of a sale.

"Uh, tell me, Mr. Rawlings," the broker said, hoping to find out what kind of backing the man had, "what's the name of your firm?"

"Land Development Enterprises," Rawlings said flatly.

"I see. Can't say as how I'm

familiar with that one," he said. Obviously a dummy corporation, Greyling concluded, and after putting a few more leading questions to his guest abandoned the inquiries.

It was clear that whoever wanted this land didn't want his identity revealed, which meant Greyling would be unable to estimate what the buyer had in mind as far as price was concerned. So he would have to resort to the time-honored system of offer and acceptance, which in turn meant getting the buyer to name his price. "Just what terms did your firm have in mind?" he asked.

"You said on the phone," countered the visitor, "that you could name a fair price."

Greyling frowned. He hated to start the bargaining, but obviously the men behind Rawlings were good bargainers, and with a cow-pasture like the Sperber property

anything over five digits was a killing. So he launched a ten-minute tirade on the beauties of the land, the untapped wealth below its surface, the relative prices of land in the area, the booming economy, his personal troubles and, in case Rawlings wanted the land for something other than its oil wells, its potential value both as farm and factory property.

Towards the end of his speech his visitor began looking around the room and shifting in his seat. Greyling had a good sense of audience and realized he was putting off his guest, so he hastened to his conclusion and said, "So I don't think I'm being at all unreasonable in suggesting thirty-five thousand for the land. I have so much faith in those wells that I'm tempted to request a royalty on the oil you raise, but if you pay the full amount now, in cash, I'll drop that request."

Greyling settled back in his chair and strained the muscles of his face against the temptation to look eager. His eyes scrutinized the face of his customer for that pained reaction that inevitably appeared when a ridiculous price was named.

However no expression except thoughtfulness crossed Rawlings' demeanor, and, after only a few moments, he said, "That will be acceptable."

Greyling suppressed a gasp. Barely controlling the tremble in his voice, he buzzed his secretary and said "Please come in with a deed blank, and your pad and pencil. And be prompt, Mr. Rawlings is in a hurry."

TWO

IN SOUTHERN CALIFORNIA, in Pennsylvania, in Florida and in about six other key locations in the United States, similar negotiations were being carried on. In each case the buyer represented a dummy company interested in buying an abandoned oil property. And in each case the broker or principal named a price far too high, expecting a counter-proposition. And in each case the terms were accepted calmly, to the astonishment of the seller.

And after the papers were drawn up, the seller inevitably wondered, as his pen poised to sign his property over to the purchaser, if he had perhaps not sold it too cheaply.

But the phenomenon was not restricted to the United States. Similar deals were being consummated in such widely divergent places as Venezuela, Arabia, Iran, France, Turkey, and even in Communist countries, where land was not held privately, arrangements were made for an unknown syndicate to occupy an abandoned oil site. Within a period of weeks a network of such sites or, if the nation had no oil facilities, old mine-

shafts, had been established around the globe.

After each site was secure the agent would send a coded cable to Singapore, where a stocky but rather tall Oriental read it with satisfaction and pushed another pin into his atlas.

THREE

THE LABORATORIES of Gulf Coast Power and Light were set off from the immense complex of grids and high voltage equipment that sprawled over twenty acres of southwestern Texas land. The large white adobe building seemed to shrink under the intimidating whine of the machinery on the other side of the decorative pond that set it off.

Illya Kuryakin crossed the little foot bridge over that pond. Lillies floated on its surface and goldfish darted from under a rock. He paused to admire this little tribute to peacefulness amid the shrieks and hums of high-powered hardware.

Beyond the pond, about thirty yards from the laboratory, a laminated steel fence had been erected with signs suggesting that a curious person would be treated with considerable displeasure.

But the fence did not conceal entirely the scaffolding inside it, which rose almost as high as that of an oil well.

Illya continued across the bridge and passed through the doors of the laboratory, where he was greeted by a red-headed receptionist whose eyes reflected their appreciation for Illya's blond, steel-eyed good looks.

She announced him to the lady who was expecting him, and with disappointment showed him to an inner office and turned him over to Frieda Winter.

Her official title, according to the lettering on her door, was assistant director of experimental projects, and Illya, thinking in stereotypes, had expected a stout woman with mousy hair, horn-rimmed glasses and a white smock that would display about as much figure as a pup tent.

If he was disappointed, it certainly didn't show in the warm glow that spread over his cheeks as his eyes took her in. She was, for a laboratory worker and administrator, quite a dish. Her hair was dark auburn, almost black with red highlights, and her eyes hazel and round and intense. She wore no smock at all, but a red skirt with matching sweater that revealed a splendid figure.

During the course of conversation Illya Kuryakin managed to sneak a look at her ankles, hoping to find some disfigurement that would release him from having to be interested in Freida Winter the woman, and enable him to pay the strictest attention to Freida Winter the scientist. But her ankles were

as well-turned as any item of fine furniture.

Evidently she was thinking much the same thing about him, for she said, "I somehow expected a Dick Tracy hat and the rest of the G-Man bit."

Illya smiled boyishly. "No, the investigative offices have become very cool these days. I mean, we try to be cool. It makes our enemies think we're not scared to death. It also," he added, "makes women think we're not terribly interested in them."

"I suppose that's a good thing, professionally speaking."

"Professionally speaking," Illya said. They exchanged glances, then Illya dropped his eyes, sighed, and said, "Suppose we speak professionally then."

"Yes." She walked to her desk and sat down. "How much do you know about Dr. Dacian and his work?"

"Quite a lot, but suppose you tell me everything, from the way he was hired to the events of the last day you saw him. Then I'd like you to show me the apparatus and explain its operation to me as completely as you can. I have more technical knowledge than you think, but quite a lot less than I'd like to have, so speak to me like a colleague but don't be surprised when I ask some incredibly stupid questions."

She smiled. Then, after ordering coffee from the laboratory cafeteria, she began to tell Illya all about the engagement of Edward Dacian by Gulf Coast Power and Light.

It had been well known that Gulf Coast was experimenting with the idea of tapping the heat beneath the mantle of the earth to produce cheap electricity, and Dacian had read about the lab's work in a journal. Their experiments corresponded to some he had been performing at Colorado School of Mining, but the school simply couldn't put at his disposal the kind of financial backing he needed to explore his ideas to their logical conclusion. Thus he got in touch with Gulf Coast and was hired.

Within eight months he had constructed a laser of enormous power, operating on light transmitted through gas instead of crystal and using a system of "mirrors" which were made of opaque liquids contained in saucer-shaped crystal containers.

The liquids intensified the laser beam terrifically, but their formula was known only to Dr. Dacian, and they constituted the essence of his earth-piercing apparatus.

"Dr. Dacian," Frieda Winter explained, "learned that the beam works most effectively in already-existing shafts. The beam, in other words, is poor at starting a hole, but if it operates in a well the walls of the shaft contain the potency of the beam. The beam works faster the deeper the shaft. We ascertained

that it took the beam twenty-four hours to dig through the first two thousand feet of surface, twelve hours to pierce the next two thousand, and so on almost in geometric proportions."

"In other words, it would take about forty-eight hours to penetrate the mantle in a land formation of average depth, but only about two if the beam were sent down a shaft the depth, say, of an average oil well."

The girl looked at him with admiration.

"It didn't take very long for you to calculate that," she said.

"In most things I think fast. Now tell me, was Dr. Dacian's progress publicized?"

"Only by word of mouth. We tried to prevent official publicity and tried to stop gossip, but unfortunately people aren't made that way, and I imagine somebody got loose-tongued over a drink. I assure you it wasn't I," she said quickly.

"You needn't be defensive," the U.N.C.L.E. agent assured her. "Now I'd like you to tell me, or check for me, whether during this time any suspicious individuals came to work for your company. It stands to reason that the persons most suspect are those who quit their jobs around the same time as Dacian disappeared."

Frieda Winter handed Illya Kuryakin a slim file. "You'll find in there the records of six people who joined the company, in capacities ranging from janitor to executive, and left in a period ranging from two weeks before to two weeks after Dr. Dacian's disappearance. Everyone else has been checked thoroughly or is under surveillance, but these six have not been located."

Illya removed six smaller envelopes from the file and opened each, removing neatly arranged dossiers on the individuals in question. They contained, among other things, a photograph of the person, used on identification badges or cards which all personnel were required to carry with them at all times.

Illya, one of whose duties was to brief himself regularly on the faces of his antagonists, glanced quickly at each picture, studying it and comparing it with a mental image in his brain's rogue's gallery.

On the fifth photo his eyes widened. The bony face, the angular Adam's apple, the unusual grey scar on the brow, tallied with a face Illya knew.

He studied the accompanying documents: Paul Rollins, alias Rawlings and a few other pseudonyms, had come to work for Gulf Coast as a groundskeeper. His employers had not bothered to check on background or references for such an inconsequential job, but after Dacian's disappearance an investigation had disclosed that Rollins had been involved in a

number of criminal activities and had a prison record. He had also been arraigned on a kidnaping charge but his case had been dismissed for lack of evidence.

"This looks like our man," Illya said.

"Most likely it is," Frieda said. "The F. B. I. agrees and is already putting a search out for him. And incidentally—"

Illya anticipated her question. "I work for a different outfit," he explained, "and all I can tell you is that we're good guys, just like the F. B. I. But we aren't too chummy with those fellows, and besides, our records are often more complete than theirs."

"I see."

"I would like to transit this material to my superior officers so that they can run routine checks on the other five, but I would especially like to find out as much as possible about this Rollins. Perhaps during lunch—"

"As much as we know about him is in that envelope," Frieda said lugubriously. "But perhaps we can find another excuse for lunch."

"Would mutual hunger be acceptable?"

"You are a fast thinker!"

They went to the laboratory's cafeteria and took their seats at a table away from other diners. After the main course the U.N.C.L.E. agent excused himself and contacted Waverly, telling him as much as he'd learned and suggesting that all data on Paul Rollins be sifted and the man's current whereabouts be traced if possible. Then Illya retured to the cafeteria for dessert and coffee.

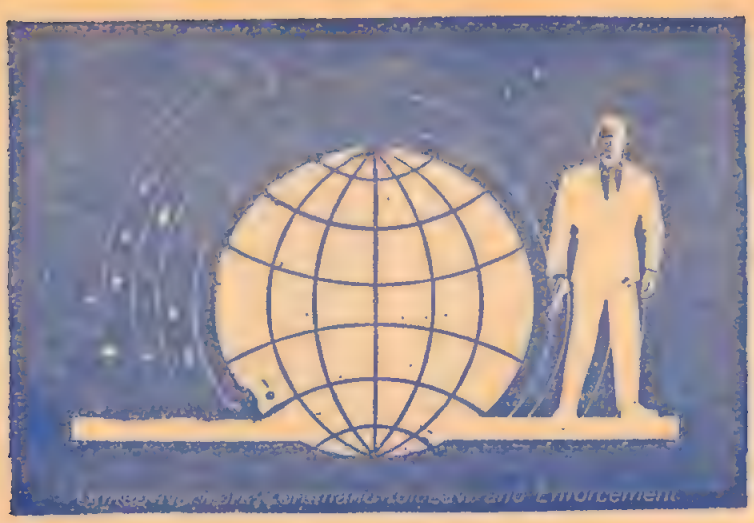
"I want to hear more about Dr. Dacian's experiments," he said. "Did he ever suggest when talking to you, for instance, that his beam might have a potential other than peaceful?"

"Yes, he did. Well, let me put it this way. He said to me once that he shuddered to think of what might happen if the instrument were used by someone who didn't know exactly what he was doing. Then he thought for a moment and said he shuddered even more to think that it might fall into the hands of a wicked person who *did* know exactly what he was doing."

"How well did you know Dr. Dacian?"

"We were good friends," Frieda said, her face registered no indication that anything more serious might have existed between them. "He was an enormously outgoing and expansive man. He wore his heart on his sleeve and I don't think there was a furtive or dishonest bone in his body. He was patriotic, and he had a strong revulsion to what he called wickedness. In short, Mr. Kurakin, he was a peaceful man, and it would take overwhelming evidence to make me believe he defected or sold out."

"Calm down," Illya said. "I nev-



er suggested anything of the sort. I only want to know if he realized that the peaceful instrument he had created might also be converted into a weapon. And I suppose I want to know to what extent he could resist pressure to disclose his formulas to anyone he suspected of having 'wicked' intentions."

"I believe Edward Dacian would die before revealing them. He was that kind of man."

"Yes, but could he be forced to produce the rigs themselves?"

"I just don't know. I'm told that wicked people use some rather nasty techniques for coercing their fellow men."

Illya smiled. "That is about the mildest statement I have ever heard. You're very charming, Miss Winter."

The girl blushed, and an embarrassed pause ensued. Then she said "I imagine you're interested in a demonstration. Why don't we go behind the laboratory and look at Dr. Dacian's apparatus."

"Fine."

They pushed away from the table and proceeded out of the building into a garden in the rear. The sun was strong and warm, and the air was fragrant with perfume from semi-tropical flowers.

Frieda Winter unlocked the door of the compound and they entered. She reached under an almost invisible bubble in the fence and switched off an electric eye guarding the perimeter of the rig. They then strolled up to the scaffolding, and Illya scrambled under the pipes and tubes to get a closer look at the machinery at the center. It was disappointingly simple, the vital mechanisms being sheathed in steel so that only a tubular lens extended from the box's belly. A shaft about a yard in diameter yawned beneath the tube.

A thick pipeline emerged from

the ground near the rig, and nearby on a kind of dolly stood a complicated knot of ducts, valves, gauges and the like.

"Water is pumped into the shaft from that pipeline," Frieda explained. "Of course, if the shaft extended from a river bed or ocean floor, we would not need to pump in water at all. But since it would have been too expensive to do that for experimental puroses, we simply tapped the Gulf waters. Come here."

She beckoned to Kuryakin to stand near the mouth of the shaft. He approached it but by the time he was standing by her side the heat from the bowels of the earth was almost intolerable. They backed off.

"Once the shaft is dug by the beam, the water is passed into it under controlled means, and this apparatus here," she said pointing to the dolly, "is sealed over the shaft. It receives the steam and keeps it superheated until it can be converted into mechanical energy. Of course, if this were an electric plant, a number of shafts would be sent down, and they would be considerably wider than this one, you understand.

"And they would be harnessed directly to dynamos instead of linked up from a distance, as we've done here. Nevertheless, as crude as our apparatus is, we've produced electricity more abundantly and cheaply than any other source known to man. And all we do," she smiled, "is add water."

"But if you sent your beam too far—"

"We would have the first active volcano in the continental United States, to state the matter unimaginatively."

They gazed at the apparatus respectfully, then returned to the laboratory.

ACT IV

KEY TO HELL

THE TRUCK PULLED up to the prefabricated hut on the Sperber site, and the driver and two helpers got out of the cab. The driver knocked on the door of the hut and was greeted by a gaunt man with a funereal expression on his face and a strange grey scar running almost from temple to temple.

The driver thrust a set of papers under the bony man's nose, murmuring, "Scaffolding."

While Paul Rollins, alias Rawlings, was examining the bill of lading, the driver and his helpers ambled away and gazed with perplexity at the bleak property. Some scrubby trees grew here and there, and wild grass and sage covered the rocky soil to the edge of the property, which was bounded by a range of hills on the west and a river on the east and south.

Spaced out at intervals of an

acre or so were the skeletons of oil rigs, rusty and useless.

The driver pushed his stetson up on his brow and scratched his balding head.

"What do you think?" he whispered.

"I think they either know there's oil down there, or else they're all crazy as bedbugs," said one helper.

"If there's oil down there," said the other helper, "I'll drink a glass of it before breakfast every day for the rest of my life."

"Maybe they're not drilling for oil?" said the first.

"Of course not," said the driver, "they're drilling for high octane gasolene."

The three men laughed, and then one of the helpers said "Truthfully, now, what kind of rig can they construct with the scaffolding we brung 'em? There ain't enough there to construct any kind of oil rig I've ever seen, and I've seen 'em all."

"Maybe they're expecting another load of scaffolding, or getting it from some other outfit than us," the driver surmised.

"Maybe," his assistants agreed.

"But if that's all they're using," the driver went on, "I don't reckon they'll get much deeper than fifty yards."

They chuckled again and ambled back to the hut, where the bony man gave them their signed copies of the papers. They unloaded the pipes, plates, and hardware and departed, smirking.

Rollins assembled his crew and they set about wrecking the pumping rig over the well furthest from the road. After it had been removed, the crew carried the scaffolding to the well and began erecting a low rig resembling a quarter-scale model of an oil-drilling tower. A square space was left in the middle over the oil shaft, a space exactly the dimensions of Edward Dacian's volcano box. When the job was done, Rollins had a coded message cabled to Singapore.

And from several dozen other places throughout the world, similar cables issued.

TWO

EDWARD DACIAN raised his heavy eyelids and looked at the ceiling of his cell. It was white and sterile, and he silently gave thanks that although he was a prisoner he was not being held in a dank, cold dungeon. The place was white-plastered, air-conditioned, and, though austere, not uncomfortable.

The only trouble was that his captors were not feeding him. His bowels had been playing games with his system the last few days, alternating between severe diarrhea and severe constriction. And now there was nothing at all in his stomach and it didn't matter; he felt nothing.

They had not begun to torture him yet, but he knew it must follow soon. Because he was a coward he had allowed himself to be frightened into a limited agreement. He would construct his devices, one at a time, with the materials they provided for him. But he would not disclose the formula by which the devices were put together, nor the secret of the liquid mirrors by which the laser beam was intensified to literally earth-shattering proportions.

He had bluffed them into believing that he would give up his life before revealing those formulas, but in his heart he doubted whether he could withstand physical agony. And so, dawdling as best he could, he made his machines and was almost finished with the third. The first had created the volcano in one of the numerous Luciparan islands.

The second had all but wiped Tapwana, the rebellious island, off the map. And this one? It would undoubtedly be employed against a target considerably more ambitious than a petty island.

He knew he had little time left before they lost their patience with him. Yesterday they had taken him to a factory where he had seen three dozen of his machines being constructed. They had of course analyzed his other two and used them as bases for this large crop. Nevertheless his special formulas had eluded their analyses so far, and when they were through with the devices they would really begin pressing him to give away the essential secret so that the mirrors could be installed.

From what he could see of their progress on the basic device, he had only a few days left.

Then it would be torture.

He thought about the ancient tortures, racks and things like that, but he knew they had far more sophisticated ones than those nowadays. He had seen pictures of men whose brains had been so scrambled they were mere puppets. He could be one of them. The mere thought sent a ripple down his spine.

They were softening him up. Already the want of food and sleep was beginning to tell on him. He had begun to wonder what difference it made who had the formula or what was done with it. If the human race was hell-bent on destroying itself, it would be done whether they used his device or atomic bombs or fists and teeth.

But no, that train of thought was contrary to everything he had come to hold dear. There were still decent people in the world, and he could never obliterate the distinction in his mind between those decent ones and the wicked ones. Before he did his mind itself would be obliterated.

Dr. Edward Dacian gazed at the white ceiling, wondering just how much pain he could stand before they made him tell.

THREE

ALEXANDER WAVERLY studied the transcript of Illya Kuryakin's report, frowning. He removed his pipe from his mouth and, with the mouthpiece, tapped the description of Paul Rollins as if to sound a chest for a false bottom. His mind, like the memory bank of a great computer, was permitting a controlled cascade of associations and memories to fill his consciousness until he had recollected almost everything there was to know about Rollins.

Nevertheless it was wise to double-check, and of course to investigate the other suspects whose descriptions Illya had just given him. And besides, Waverly wanted to know the up-to-date whereabouts of the gaunt, scar-browed man.

He called Henderson in the Research Division of U.N.C.L.E. and immediately a review of the files was instigated on a Top Priority basis.

Rollins' file was dealt with first, and Waverly and his advisor sat before the screen of the information retriever, which scanned the organization's vast library of tapes for the one on which Rollins' data was located.

This data was printed out, while at the same time a photo of him was retrieved from the microfilm library and flashed on the Recordak screen, within moments after the instructions on Rollins had been programmed into the computer.

Waverly and Henderson studied the reports and renewed their acquaintance with the unpleasant features of Rollins. "Looks like an undertaker, doesn't he?" said Henderson.

Waverly nodded lugubriously. "That may be a more appropriate description than you think."

"Sir?"

"I believe he intends to bury us, you see. In molten lava." Waverly turned from the picture to the print-out of Rollins' dossier. "I know all this," he muttered impatiently, "but where is the data on his latest whereabouts?"

"Next page, sir."

Waverly flipped over the accordioned pages of the print-out and found, with considerable gratification, that as little as two weeks ago the U.N.C.L.E. agent in the Oklahoma sector had recognized Rollins and, with the help of state police, was having a routine surveillance placed on him.

"Please contact Reid in Oklahoma at once," Waverly said to Henderson, "and have him report fully on Rollins' precise location and activities."

Henderson, who recognized the imperative tone of Waverly's voice easily after years of working with him, rushed away from the retrieval computers as if fired out of a gun.

Waverly returned to his office

and followed up on some other hunches he was coming to call "Dacian's volcano boxes." But he kept his eye cocked on his watch and wondered what was holding things up on that report from Oklahoma. Though an hour had gone by and no more, he still expected his organization to bring about a miraculous, instantaneous report.

As often as not, because he demanded miracles, he got them. But it took another two hours before Reid was on the communicator, spilling what he had learned about Rollins.

"He seems to be involved in an oil scheme of some sort, sir," Reid's husky voice told Waverly. "His procedures appear to be on the up-and-up; he purchased some land near here legitimately, and ditto for some tower scaffolding. The crew erecting the scaffolding don't smell too clean, however. A number of them have records or are otherwise suspicious."

"Very interesting," Waverly said, stuffing a wad of tobacco into a tan briar pipe and pushing papers around his desk in a hunt for his tobacco-tamping tool. "Have you or the police observed the presence of a box-like instrument with a large lens on it, like the zoom lens of a camera?"

"No, sir, but I do have one very interesting piece of information."

"Yes?"

"About ten days ago he cabled an innocuous message to Singapore. The cable address there was SINGOIL. Sounds like a contraction of Singapore Oil, which is probably the outfit behind Rollins' oil venture. That's all I know, sir."

"What was the message in that cable?"

"The message was 'All Well.' "

"Yes." Having found his tamping tool, Waverly's fingers were tapping his papers to find the outline of his matchbox. "Yes, I see. But all is not well, Reid. I want you personally to investigate Rollins' property and the drilling tower he is erecting. You are to look for a box of the kind I've described to you on his property, the dimensions and exact description of which will be telexed to you as soon as our conversation is concluded. You're to contact me the moment you find such a device or find out where it is being stored."

"Then it's not oil they're after?" said Reid.

"No, Reid. The exact nature of the device will be telexed to you. For now, let's just say that its presence is a grave threat to world security."

"Yes, sir. I'll get on this right away."

They signed off, and the second Reid's voice was cleared from his communicator Waverly was alerting the division heads of a dozen different agency sub-sections, barking instructions at them like a drill sergeant. Every local U.N.C.L.E.

operative in the United States was to be contacted right away with instructions to follow up on any THRUSH agent or criminal element involved in the erection of oil-drilling equipment.

A description of the volcano box was to be sent to them, and they were to search for it and report upon detecting it. Similar instructions were issued throughout U.N.C.L.E.'s international network, for it was obvious that THRUSH's objective was not necessarily America. The agent in Singapore was ordered to check into the individual or individuals using the cable address SINGOIL.

Finally, Waverly decided to get in touch with Napoleon to report on these developments and find out just what his other chief agent had ascertained.

Waverly knew himself to be an impatient man, but with this much at stake, the errors that might arise out of impatience were far less serious than those that might derive from sloth.

FOUR

NAPOLEON SOLO had flown by conventional means to Hong Kong and thence to Singapore. In Singapore he conferred with Joe Kingsley, U.N.C.L.E.'s temporary director; then transportation was arranged to Borua.

Since that island, and all of the islands in its federation, were hostile to peaceful interests, Napoleon would have to be smuggled in.

After resting for six hours, he made his way to a small airport outside the city, where an American jet fighter carried him to a carrier in the Banda Sea. From there he was put on a launch which conveyed him to the waters off Borua. He was greeted by a longboat and rowed to a beach on the south side of the island at a speed he wouldn't have thought possible.

The night was overcast and his arrival on this deserted spot was uneventful. A guide led him to an outpost on the side of a hillock, and as the curtain was drawn aside to admit him into the camouflaged hut, he was given a warm, comradely welcome by his fellow agent, April Dancer. The beautiful young girl wore a khaki shirt and Bermuda-length fatigue shorts and dirty sneakers, but nothing could alter the fact that U.N.C.L.E.'s contact in the Boruvian federation was as lovely as a calendar pinup. Her large, expressive eyes shimmered in the flicker of gas lamps. They appraised Napoleon with a mixture of trust and affection.

"Mr. Solo, I presume."

"April, I'm glad to work with you." He quickly described his trip, then said, "Do you have some liquid refreshment for a weary traveler? I've changed modes of transportation so often today I feel like a pinball."

"I have some warm gin and

tonic," April said. And she added "but perhaps a Coke would suit you better." This told Napoleon Solo they were free to speak.

He accepted the Coke and, after excusing the guide, they sat down to talk. As background to their conversation, a short-wave apparatus hummed on a table behind April, and all around the hut there were hoots and cackles of tropical birds.

"Nice place you have here," he said smiling.

"The maid hasn't dusted this week, so you'll have to forgive the untidiness, the snakes and the scorpions."

Napoleon shifted in his seat. "I've briefed myself to a great extent on the situation here, but I'd still like you to go over it again with me. I assume that Mr. Waverly has informed you of the urgency of our situation."

"Oh yes." Her voice was throaty and mellow, and Napoleon knew how effective April was in applying her abundant female attributes on an antagonist to make him speak freely. On the other hand, as a trained agent she was perfectly adept in the arts of self-defense, and what her muscles could not effect, her pocket arsenal could.

"Tell me all you've learned, and I'll decide what's useful and what's not."

"Fine," April said. "Well, about five years ago a native named Emilio Sarabando caught the nationalistic fever and formed a federation of the islands in this area, called the Boruvian Federation after this its principal island. The Federation doesn't seem very important when you look at it casually, but actually it has strategic importance for two reasons: it's a source of certain rare-earth minerals, and it commands certain trade routes in the Indo-Chinese territory. Submarines or missiles based hereabouts could disrupt shipping in this neighborhood quite severely.

"Anyway," April Dancer continued, tugging on a Coke herself, "about a year ago Sarabando grew discontent with his political status and began making noises like a dictator. Our top brass decided that Sarabando, who is not the tyrant type, though he is a strong politician, was stepping out of character. We smelled control over him by another power. It didn't take me long to trace the strings to THRUSH. Sarabando is their puppet and has been for a year."

Napoleon Solo absorbed this information and sat thoughtfully for

a moment. Then he asked, "What happened with Tapwana?"

"Tapwana is the outermost island in the crescent. It's a key one because it controls the channel between the Federation and the Luciparas. Some people think the inhabitants of Tapwana are not of the same racial stock as those of the rest of the Boruvian group, but in any event they have resisted incorporation into the group from the beginning, and when THRUSH began putting pressure on them to come in, they rebelled quite belligerently.

"So, about a week before the horrible volcano eruption, Sarabando warned the governor of Tapwana that grave consequences would ensue if the island didn't fall in line with the political structure of the Federation. The governor in effect spit in Sarabando's eye, and you know what happened then. Come."

April Dancer rose and took Napoleon by the hand. She led him out of the hut and up a rough path towards the top of the hill. When they reached the summit they plopped down on an outcropping of rock, and gazed west in the direction of Tapwana. For several minutes, in the blackness of the night and the roiling of black clouds overhead, Napoleon could distinguish nothing on the horizon where her finger pointed.

But after a while he realized that one spot seemed to glow, and

as his eyes adjusted he could make out an eerie reddish-orange flickering. She pressed a pair of binoculars into his hands, and through them he could see a horrible yet fascinatingly beautiful turmoil of red molten metal churning far out to sea. His ears became aware of a rumbling, which he realized was not thunder but the sound of the earth throwing up its vitals in long, rhythmically timed spasms.

Focusing more precisely, he could make out the outline of a small cone out of which the lava spewed. With the passage of time that cone would grow to mountainous proportions, continuing to emit the seething magma until the formation of a crust, and cooling rains, capped it and made it dormant.

But that could take years, decades, even eons, and meanwhile life on that island, and on those islands nearby that directly received the pumice and cinders and soot ejaculated from Tapwana, could not exist.

"They say that the stuff that comes out of volcanoes makes

great soil after a few million years," he said humorlessly. "Meanwhile, though, humanity has to have some place to rest its feet without getting them burned off. I don't think I like the idea of volcanic eruptions on the main streets of my favorite cities." He put the binoculars to his eyes once again, gazed at Tapwana in awe, then gave them back to April.

They looked out to sea, watching the ebb and flow of the reddish light on the horizon, and letting the cool night breeze play on their cheeks.

"It's like taking your favorite gal to a drive-in movie," Napoleon murmured.

April leaned against his shoulder. "It's good to have you here, Napoleon. How's Illya?"

Solo brought Dancer up to date on his friend's coordinating mission. A gust of wind bent the trees inland and Napoleon put a protective arm around her shoulder. "It's getting a little too chilly," he said.

"Yes, let's go back to the hut."

Hand in hand they descended to the shack. "I don't suppose you were aware," April said as they sat down over a crude table, "that as you came down that hill you were never more than two feet away from the muzzle of a gun or the blade of machete."

"I imagined you'd have guards posted. Silent devils, aren't they?"

"Yes, but the enemy can be just as silent. I worry for you, so please let's transact our business quickly and get you out of here."

"That's fine with me. I want you to tell me what events led up to the volcano in the last days of Tapwana. I learned from your report that Edward Dacian was here."

"Yes, but our U.N.C.L.E. agent, Philip Bouvier, working here, wasn't sure, although he had of course been shown a photograph of Dr. Dacian while in training in Singapore. Philip Bouvier is half French and half native. Maybe you remember his assignment in the Tahitian Affair? Yes, he's terribly clever. Philip communicated with Harry Gray and informed him that a fleet of helicopters had landed on the far side of the island, and Sarabando had gone out there to meet with the men who got off. The descriptions given left much to be desired, but two seemed rather distinctive. One was of a white man with close-cropped red hair, who certainly was Dacian, as reports from headquarters later verified.

"The other was a barrel-chested oriental who seemed quite tall for one of his race, and we can safely guess that it's Kae Soong. Soong is chief THRUSH operative in this area, and it's well known that he's directly responsible for the control exerted over the dictator."

"Yes, go on."

"Philip managed to get in closer, due to the unfortunate guard whose throat managed to get in the

vicinity of his dagger. He trained binoculars on the party and got a glimpse of the red-haired Dacian, but Soong was inside in conference with Sarabando and things got too warm to hang around. Anyway, the next thing Philip knew was that they were taking off in the direction of Tapwana. He couldn't be sure that was their destination, but the events of the last few months pointed to it."

"Did we have anyone on Tapwana?"

"None of our regulars, no. We had a man there on the payroll, but we didn't know if he could be trusted, especially on something that, from what we could gather, was shaping up to be pretty big. So that night Philip set out by launch for Tapwana, which is about four hours away.

"He stashed the launch in a cove and made his way towards the city. He guessed that if the helicopter party was anywhere at all it would be at Sarabando's villa-type office.

"He was right. The lights burned brightly at two in the morning, and the place was swarming with armed guards and spectators. Obviously a pretty serious pow-wow was in progress.

"Philip then made his way to the back of the building and saw, in the broad courtyard and field behind the villa, five helicopters. But he knew that six had taken off for the island. So one of them had broken away from the others.

"He had no idea who or what it contained, or where it had gone. But around three, when the conference broke up, the five copters took off again in the direction of Borua. Not long afterwards, however, Philip Bouvier saw that six returned!"

"Strange. Or at least it must have seemed strange then. But you of course know now what happened."

"Certainly. While Kae Soong and his boys were trying to bring the Tapwanans peacefully to their knees, Dacian was elsewhere on the island, planting his little volcano box. Obviously negotiations failed, and Kae Soong signaled Dacian to throw the switch."

"What did Philip Bouvier do when the helicopters left?"

"He visited the governor, who knows about U.N.C.L.E. The governor had defied the group of 'thugs,' as he called them."

"Did he say Kae Soong was their leader?"

"Soong never presented himself by name; merely as The Gentleman from Singapore. They're very formal around here. But the governor was sure it was Soong. At any rate, the governor felt that the thugs wouldn't trouble him again, now that they had seen how determined his people were to retain their independence from the Boruvian Federation. Philip wasn't so sure about that. He headed

back to Borua, and was told by his man there that after a few hours, the helicopters had taken off in a northerly direction."

"Towards where, do you guess?"

"Eventually to Singapore."

"What happened then?"

"Nothing eventful, but on the third morning following their visit to Tapwana the island was boiled off the face of the earth.

As if to emphasize the horror of such a scene, a deep rumble sounded far off in the west.

"I flew over it," April said, and suddenly her lip trembled and her eyes filled with tears. "Nothing. Not a tree, not a dwelling, not a hint of life, not a soul. Oh Napoleon, we've got to stop them—we've got to!"

April Dancer had taken his wrist in her hand and her nails almost cut through his flesh. All at once a low beeping sound emitted from the short wave set.

"That will be headquarters," Napoleon said. "And Philip Bouvier—where is he now, April?"

"Returning here he was shot at and wounded. I was able to get most of this first-hand information from him in the hospital in Singapore."

ACT V

THE MAN FROM SINGAPORE

EVERYTHING pointed to Singapore.

Paul Rollins, who had purchased the oil wells in Oklahoma, had cabled to Singapore when the deal was made.

Kae Soong had called himself The Man from Singapore.

His helicopter squadron appeared to be based in Singapore.

It was clear that the THRUSH operation was being controlled from Singapore. But what had begun to grow clear only in the last week was that Singapore might be the next victim of volcanic aggression. It was this that Waverly told Napoleon Solo.

Napoleon sucked his breath in sharply when his chief suggested the possibility, and gazed blankly at the short wave radio as if it might be the old warhorse himself, his unlit pipe drooping out of the corner of his bloodhoundlike face, eyes sad with a kind of perpetual contemplation of calamity. Behind Napoleon, April burst out with, "But there are millions of people in Singapore—"

"Is that April?" Waverly asked in response to the girl's high voice.

"Yes, sir," Napoleon said.

"You may tell her that we're aware of Singapore's population. But just as important, we're aware of THRUSH's total indifference to the lives of millions if the stakes are big enough. In this case the stakes are the souls of billions—that is to say, control of all the world's governments. At this moment, so far as we've been able to conclude, THRUSH is establishing volcanic

centers in key locations around the globe.

"We've little idea about their whereabouts specifically, because we've no instruments for detecting the Dacian device. But our Singapore headquarters has been tracking down the sources of cables and other communications to THRUSH and the conspiracy appears to be global.

"I have Illya working on a system to detect and destroy volcano boxes, but I can't count on its being perfected in time, even if it's developed at all. There are too may unknowns, so we have to aim at the source and try to stop the head man from giving the signal to detonate the volcanoes. And of course, we have to find Dacian."

"To your knowledge, sir, are the volcano boxes fully operational?"

"I suspect they are not. But I believe intense pressure, if not torture, is being applied to Dacian to disclose his formula for a key element in the boxes. In anticipation of his yielding, the boxes, minus this key element, are being installed. The moment he relents the element will be mass produced and set into the boxes. That is why it is imperative to find Dacian. I am almst certain he is in Singapore."

"But what makes you think Singapore is next on THRUSH's agenda?"

"Well, it happens that Sarabando, that nice little tyrant who wiped out Tapwana, has suggested to the government of Singapore that its presence in the Federation would be most welcome. More significant, Sarabando has hinted that Singapore's refusal to come into the Federation would be regarded as an unfriendly if not hostile act.

"I will not go into the political implications now, though I'm sure you can figure most of them out for yourself. It only needs be said that those implications are worldwide. If Singapore is destroyed, no other government will resist a THRUSH demand for surrender. The volcanic weapon will simply be too potent for any sensible government to resist."

"Just one question. Why destroy Singapore if that's where THRUSH is basing its operations?"

"Singapore," Waverly explained, "is a highly strategic location. It's a valuable port and its position, in relation to the Boruvian Federation, gives THRUSH an unbroken chain of control in that part of the Pacific Ocean. So they will, if necessary, destroy it and move their headquarters elsewhere.

"You have to understand, Napoleon, that Dacian is being forced to make one of his secret elements at a time, but THRUSH is going to try to blackmail the world by claiming it has the formula and can make as many of them as it wants. And remember, if Dacian talks, THRUSH *will* be able to make as

many operational volcano boxes as it wants. So you must proceed to Singapore at once, locate Kae Soong and Dacian, and capture or kill."

"Any hint of their specific location?"

"SINGOIL, Napoleon. That is their cable address, but we've been unable to ascertain how they pick up their messages. If you can do that, it will lead you to Kae Soong."

They signed off and Napoleon turned to April. The muscles of her jaw were rigid with tension, and her brow deeply furrowed as if she were in pain. Napoleon, thinking it was only the news from U.N.C.L.E. headquarters that was disturbing her, was about to speak when April Dancer silenced him.

He held his breath and the muscles of his legs tightened in expectation of fast movement. She was straining her ears, and her eyes darted to the left as she heard a bird screeching.

Napoleon Solo tiptoed over to her.

"What is it?" he whispered.

"My guards haven't signaled as they're supposed to, every half hour. Instead I've been hearing—it could be a macaw, but... Come this way."

She moved towards a bamboo panel in the side of the hut, which she gingerly removed. She fell to her hands and knees and crept out after looking both ways. Napoleon followed, and after exiting paused beside her. April reached under a pile of leaves and drew out a pair of machetes.

They crept along the side of the hut and peered cautiously around the corner. It was pitch black, but a dim glow from the doorway of the hut highlighted a few objects directly in front of it.

One of these was a skinny oriental with machete raised. The machete was bloody. He stood poised before the doorway, as if to strike down anyone who emerged from it. Then Napoleon caught the glint of something metallic a few feet away from the intruder, and his eyes at last made out the shape of a second one bearing what might be a grenade.

After a moment the grenade-bearer crept up to the doorway of the hut, and behind him appeared yet another oriental, a loincloth his only piece of clothing. He came to a stealthy halt.

The obvious plan was for the second to toss his bomb, and for the others to position themselves in such a way that any survivors would be slain as they emerged. Napoleon nudged April and nodded with his chin in the direction of the grenade-bearer. She was to take care of him, and he would tackle the other two.

The second intruder released the silvery object, and as he did April and Napoleon rushed them. A pop and hissing noise told them it had-

n't been a grenade but a tear-gas cannister, and as they covered the ten yards between themselves and their antagonists their nostrils caught the pungent odor of the gas seeping out of the hut.

They took the intruders completely by surprise. The bomb-thrower reached for a gun, but April's machete lashed across his shoulder. He cried out hideously as blood gouted out of the wound. The nearest oriental with the machete whirled around but had scarcely brought his blade back when Napoleon's caught him fiercely on the neck. The other man was ready for Napoleon and lashed quickly at his exposed left side, but the agent twisted out of the way and warded off a back-hand swipe of the blade as the attacker tried to get him coming back.

For an instant they squared off, and it looked as if it would be an even duel. But April had now freed herself and was making ready to join the fray. In matters of world defense, two-to-one odds were not unfair. But as the oriental glanced at April, Napoleon lunged, catching him off his guard, and slashed at his mid-section.

He dropped his machete to defend the blow, and the ring of crossed blades raised a violent chatter of jungle birds. Napoleon brought his foot up and caught the swordsman in the kidney. He yelped in pain, but it was the last

noise he was to make, for with immense speed Napoleon brought the razor tip of his weapon up into the man's throat, and he dropped, dying, at Solo's feet.

"We can't stay here any longer," April panted. I must go back into the hut to destroy the radio and some documents."

"You'll come with me to Singapore," Napoleon said. "Now hurry. I don't know how many more of these guys there are, and how much time it will take for them to get here."

Out of a compartment in her belt she removed a piece of cloth as fine as silk and placed it over her nose and mouth. It was a filter which folded into a package as big as a sugar cube.

Protected against the gas, she went into the hut and came out a few minutes later with the radio and some papers. They ventured

into the jungle for twenty or thirty yards, then destroyed the radio by pulling out its vitals and twisting the dials so that even if the radio were found no one would know what wavelength it was on. They buried it and burned the documents beside it. Then they carefully covered everything with dirt and leaves and headed towards the beach.

When they got there, April's guide lay slumped over a gunwale, his head almost separated from his body by a vicious machete blow, and the bottom of the boat had been stove in with heavy stones.

April Dancer ran down the beach to a point where the island cut sharply inland. As they rounded a point they stopped abruptly and spied a sailboat guarded by another oriental.

"I knew this is where it would be," she whispered, drawing out a gun and slipping a silencer over the muzzle. She aimed it at the man guarding the boat, and as the gun hissed he dropped.

"I knew they'd place their boat here to sneak up on yours," she explained once they'd shoved off and were making for open sea, "and the footsteps in the sand showed that I was right."

Napoleon took out his communicator and signaled the ship offshore to send a launch to pick them up. The cool leeward breeze carried them quickly to their destination.

TWO

THE GOVERNMENT of Singapore had read Sarabando's letter with barely stifled amusement. The dictator of the almost invisible little federation of islands to the south was extending to one of the primary centers of trade in the Asian complex an "invitation" to join, in exchange for certain privileges and prerogatives.

With elaborate oriental politeness the government had declined the invitation, explaining that its commitments to other interests made it more feasible to keep its hands untied.

Under any other circumstances such a rejection would have satisfied an insolent petty tyrant like Sarabando. But a week later he issued another invitation to Singapore. This time, cheerfully and patiently, he explained that the honorable governors of the city must have misunderstood his first note. That initial invitation was not so much a cordial expression of good will as it was a subtle suggestion of the unpleasant consequences that might follow if Singapore held out.

So, in case Singapore did not clearly get the implied message, Sarabando spelled it out a little more explicitly.

This note too provoked mirth in the cabinet of this queen of Southeast Asia, except for the response of one minister, who was convinced that Sarabando had a weapon of

grave potential, and believed that the dreadful spectacle of Tapwana's volcanic destruction had been no accident.

But his pleas were rejected by his colleagues, and though Sarabando's final message—an undisguisedly severe warning—caused some serious discussion in the higher echelons of the government, no serious measures were considered to defend against, let alone look into, Sarabando's "ravings."

A few days after the diplomatic positions jelled Kae Soong made his appearance in the secret Singapore laboratory of Edward Dacian. Dacian, who had never carried much meat on his bones, had became gaunt and stringy. His hands shook and his muscles twitched, and he had begun to blink frequently.

"I understand you are in the final stage of preparing the liquid reflectors," the chunky, tall THRUSH agent said to him.

"Y—yes, if my hands will stop trembling long enough."

"Why are you so nervous?"

"Hungry, tired."

"You're being mistreated?"

The scientists nodded jerkily.

"You know why, don't you?"

Again Dacian nodded.

"Would it not be easier, then, simply to let us have the formula for the reflectors? Then we would require no further work from you, and we would send you some place pleasant where you would dine well and sleep and never trouble with formulas."

"Heaven," Dacian said.

"You must realize that we are on the verge of deducing your formula anyway. We know what materials you have been using, we even know their measurements and combinations, and it is only a matter of time before we put together our own."

It was sheer bluff, for in spite of all attempts to assess the work Dr. Dacian was doing, his captors hadn't the slightest idea where to begin. Once they had entered the laboratory after Dacian left it for the night, and taken samples of the material he had created, by the next morning Dacian told them that by so tampering with it they had altered its nature, and he would have to start all over. Whether it was true or not, Dacian knew how to play the game of bluff as well as they.

"Why are you letting them kill you by inches?" Kae Soong asked as if "they" were on one side and Soong was on Dacian's. "If you would only be reasonable they would release you from this torture and roil."

"I'm down, not out," said Dacian in one of those American phrases which made little sense to the Oriental mind.

"You mean you will not alter your course?"

"I agreed—one device at a time," Dacian droned, his eyes

shutting involuntarily, then shapping open.

"I don't know if they will tolerate such tardy progress any longer. There is too much at stake."

"Learn my formula, then kill me. But you won't learn any more from me."

Trembling almost as if palsied, the scientist returned to his work table where, crouching over his formulas to prevent televised eavesdropping, he continued his painstaking development of the key device for the next volcano box.

The location for the next eruption had been tentatively settled on the week before. The island of Singapore is for the most part a low and of twenty or thirty feet above sea level, but the central portion is a granite formation dominated by a mountain called Bukit Timah.

It is not high as mountains go, and is really more of a hill than anything else, being less than 600 feet high. Nevertheless its position is enough to radiate destruction in all directions, and a volcanic eruption there would have at least disruptive, and probably critical, effects on rail, shipping and air traffic. And if the eruption were of greater intensity than calculations predicted, the effects would carry into the city itself, with its magnificent skyline and superb harbor facilities.

Bukit Timah, then, was the location of THRUSH's next display and possibly its last. It was beginning to look dubious that Dacian would ever reveal his formula, and even less likely that he would survive to make the reflectors for even one more box. The threat of suicide became a consideration now. Though Dacian was a coward, his suffering could reach the point where he would be performing a kindness to himself to take his life.

And to his physical suffering must be added the mental torture of realizing that his device was responsible for countless lives lost and an unimaginable number of lives threatened.

But THRUSH was not as disturbed over the prospect of losing or killing Dacian as it could have been. It was planning to use the destruction of Singapore as the key chesspiece in its game of world domination. Kae Soong and his colleagues had hoped that the destruction of Tapwana would be a broad enough hint to the nations of the planet that failure to heed a THRUSH warning would result in a spasm of volcanic fury.

But obviously the hint hadn't been broad enough. Some people were convinced that Tapwana's destruction, after rebelling against the Boruvian Federation, was strictly a coincidence. A similar event on Singapore, however, would leave no doubt in anyone's mind. Nor would anyone wonder

how far THRUSH would go in its bid for conquest.

Thus, when Singapore fell, THRUSH would issue its warning to the governments of the world, and none, witnessing the awful havoc wreaked on the island-nation, would be able to resist. Without the possession of another volcano box, THRUSH could nevertheless secure its goals.

On Bukit Timah, a pair of observers emerged from a helicopter and examined the structure of the ground. On the north side evidence of a great fissure in the granite suggested itself to their trained eyes, and a series of tests confirmed it. It was here that Dacian's next volcano box would be placed.

ACT VI

A NETWORK OF SATELLITES

ILLYA KURYAKIN and Frieda Winter had spent almost every minute together in the two days since his arrival at the Texas labotorary. But by the end of the second day they were no nearer a solution than they'd been at the beginning of the first.

There were two problems: to devise a way of locating volcano boxes, and to devise a way of destroying them once they were spotted. The first difficulty arose out of the fact that the Dacian machine emitted no special radiation, either while in operation or while dormant. True, it did project the polarized light of a laser beam when it was activated, but all of that light was directed downward into the earth, and could not therefore be detected by a conventional scanning device.

And because it did not utilize an excessive amount of electricity—in fact, it could operate on a self-contained power-pack attached to a gas generator—it could not be traced by means of its drain on conventional sources of electricity.

Of course, the workings of a volcano device might eventually be ascertained by seismograph, but that would probably make it too late, for the laser would probably bore into the magma beneath the earth's mantle a mere hour or two after causing an earthquake.

And even if you could locate a volcano box in advance of the final stage of destructiveness, there were still the problems of reaching and destroying it.

Illya said dourly, "We've been sitting in this room for eight hours. Why don't we go out and get some fresh air? Maybe it will clear our heads and help us think."

"I'd love to," Frieda said, sliding her hand into the crook of his arm.

They strolled out along the edge of the little pond in front of the building. It was a clear, crisp night, with stars blazing silver in the black night, and only a few puffs of black cloud scudding in

front of the moon. They sat down on a bench and watched the ripples in the pond send charming designs through the reflection of the sky.

Illya looked up and named some constellations. As he was talking about the summer sky Frieda moved closer and put her head on his shoulder. He gulped but kept talking, trying to ignore the warm presence of her dark hair near his neck.

"Look," he said suddenly, turning his head towards the southeastern sky. Frieda turned her face up and followed the line of his outstretched hand to a tiny white dot moving slowly and steadily towards the northeast.

"A planet?" she asked.

"No. It's moving too fast. It's either a satellite or a plane."

"How beautiful," she said.

Illya cleared his throat and rose. "Say, I'd like another look at Dacian's gadget. Do you think we could get into the compound?"

Frieda Winter sighed. "I suppose so. You really don't let anything stand in the way of your job, do you?"

She went through the steps involved to admit them into the compound without setting off the alarms, and they passed into the grounds where the scaffolding stood. It seemed to float in the sky, silhouetted against the graceful clouds that drifted before the moon.

As they stood there Illya realized that the heat generating from the shaft blasted by the device was causing the air over the scaffold to ripple. The moon and stars seemed to shimmer as they were being seen in a pond. The effect was weird and hypnotizing.

All at once, as he let his associations drift, an answer came to him and he snapped his fingers. "A satellite!"

Frieda looked up, searching the sky for the object that had passed across it a few minutes earlier.

"We'll find them by satellite," Illya elaborated, leaving Frieda as much perplexed as before.

"What are you talking about?"

"The box does emit one kind of radiation: heat. The way to locate one in operation is through infra-red scanners. The moment one of Dacian's devices is activated we can detect it with infra-red. And what better way is there to do that than via satellite? We already have several in orbit geared to pick up stellar sources of infra-red, and one trained on Russia and Southeast Asia to locate possible atomic explosions or rocket blast-offs. So we'll train our surveillance satellites on possible volcano sites. Come on. I want to get in touch with headquarters at once."

They hastened back to the laboratory, where Illya Kuryakin communicated with Waverly.

"Very good," the chief said as he digested Illya's report. "We'll start work on it immediately and try to

line up a detection system. But what about locating the boxes before they're activated? And what about destroying them after they're activiated?"

"We're still trying to figure something out on the former, but at least we have an instant way of locating the boxes once they're turned on. As for destroying them, what about missiles?"

"Negative," Waverly said. We need to send personnel to the site to ascertain that it is a Dacian device and not some other disturbance. Besides, a missile would be throwing out the baby with the bath water. We don't want to destroy a city while trying to save it."

In other words, once we've picked up a site on the orbital scanners, we have to verify it and destroy it in person."

"Correct. I always prefer to use something more dependable than human resources," Waverly said, "but if we can't figure out anything better, we'll proceed with that line of defense."

Within moments after Waverly concluded his conversation with Illya, he was exerting his prodigious influence to cut through red tape in the space program bureaucracy, and quickly arranged for special signals to be sent to those satellites equipped with infra-red detection equipment.

One of the satellites passed over the southern United States, and trained its sensors on the thermal

turbulence created by Dacian's experimental device. It relayed its information to analysts on the ground who computed the special mathematical coordinates of this man-made volcanic device. Once they had determined the unique infra-red characteristics of a volcano box in action, they could signal a program to other satellites equipped with infra-red gear.

This was done promptly, and within six hours a network of satellites was observing the earth, especially the Asian sector, with instructions to alert ground observers the moment a thermal pattern was detected which matched the one in Texas.

Illya Kuryakin was rewarding himself with a few hours of sleep when a signal from Waverly aroused him. Dreamily he reached for his communicator and murmured a sleep-slurred acknowledgement.

"I want you to proceed to Singapore at once," Waverly ordered abruptly.

"Singapore?"

"Mr. Solo is there, and we have good reason to believe that that's where the action will be. I will brief you more thoroughly once you're aloft. Instruct Miss Winter and the rest of the staff at the laboratory to keep working on a better detection and destruction system than the one we now have, and to phone me as soon as they come up with something. But we'll have to make do with what we now have until then, and I need your services in Singapore."

As soon as they'd signed off Illya threw his personal effects into a kit bag. He slid into his jacket and signaled an agent in San Antonio to make arrangements for an U.N.C.L.E. jet to be ready to take off for Singapore as soon as Illya's plane arrived from the laboratory.

He scurried down the hall and knocked on Frieda's door.

"I'm going," he announced calmly.

She thrust her lower lip forward in a sad pout. "So soon? We haven't really—"

"You're to keep working on a solution and to call this number and ask for this man as soon as you have something." He handed her a slip of paper.

She put her fingers on his cheek. "You haven't shaved."

"I never shave for the end of the world," he said.

"Oh Illya—come back when you've done your job." She threw her arms around his neck and put her lips to his cheek.

He ran his fingers through her auburn hair, wondering if it were the last feminine thing he would ever know.

TWO

THE BIG PLANE settled on to the strip at Tengah Airfield and a moment later its back-up system roared, braking the forward momentum of the plane and sending a flock of tropical birds screeching angrily into the sky. Illya Kuryakin looked out of the portal and saw very little activity, which was the way he preferred it.

In the briefing Alexander Waverly had advised landing at Tengh, a military airport controlled principally by the British R.A.F., instead of at Kallang. The latter was closer to the city of Singapore, but was a civil airfield, and Illya didn't want to risk recognition.

A long ride from Tangah to the city was to be preferred to assassination at Kallang. But after the long, arduous plane trip Illya was no longer sure which was the more desirable.

Waverly had instructed him quite thoroughly on every aspect of his mission. In essence, Illya was

to contact Napoleon and exchange information, but they were strictly prohibited from meeting. Waverly wanted them to act independently to cut down the risk of their collective capture. Napoleon had April Dancer to serve in whatever capacity Napoleon thought best.

They had two primary objectives. The first, and most important, was to locate Dacian and his captors and destroy the formulas, equipment, and personnel before an aggressive action could be taken. But if that were not possible, they were to wait for Waverly's signal indicating that a satellite had detected a volcano box in action. They were to rush to the site and take whatever measures necessary to put the machine out of commission. They were to play it by ear, and to use whatever transportation and weaponry the circumstances called for.

"There is one aspect of this," Waverly had concluded, "that I cannot emphasize enough. Namely, that you will have between twelve and forty-eight hours to pinpoint and destroy the box from the moment of detection."

"Yes, sir," Illya said, instinctively looking at his watch.

NAPOLEON HAD arranged for April Dancer to check into a small hotel downtown and to pass herself off as a tourist. She was eminently skilled as a linguist and could therefore submerge herself in the market place and listen without anyone suspecting she understood. There were several clubs and bars where underworld elements and spies hung out and, picking up an unsuspecting American tourist named Don Wirts, she made him take her to these places for drinks. She kept her eyes and ears open, while murmuring the usual hare-brained tourist cliches to her escort.

Napoleon, in the meantime, had made a number of attempts to find out the names of the principals of Singapore Oil, and the company's address. *Singoil* was its cable address, and this THRUSH front had been the clearing house for communications involving the volcano plot. But all of his inquiries, discreet and otherwise, had availed him nothing. *Singoil* was a completely false company with nothing indeed but a cable address. Furthermore, the messages received by the cable company were neither delivered nor picked up. Several times a day a man would call and in fair English, say, "This is *Singoil;* please read any messages." And so there was apparently no way to trace the principals.

Napoleon was walking off his frustration at quayside when Illya buzzed him.

"I'm in town," the Russian informed him with the bland understatement of a fraternity brother checking in at a conference. "What's up?"

"The rats are far underground," Napoleon said. "I can't trace *Singoil* for all the tea in this part of the world, which is considerable." He explained the efforts he'd made so far.

"How about sending them a message which must be delivered in person?"

"They'll know it's a trap," Napoleon protested.

"Exactly. You'll let yourself walk into it, and that'll lead you to our playmates."

"It's a beautiful idea, and I thought of it before you did, but there's one thing wrong. Suppose, instead of capturing me alive for interrogation, they simply decide to gun me down on sight."

"That would be unsportsmanlike," Illya said. "But I don't think they'd kill you until they knew what's brought you here, how much you know, and how much you've told other people."

"That's comforting," said Napoleon Solo, chuckling.

"Let April Dancer follow you. When the tag is made, she'll be right behind you. She can contact me and we'll drop in on the party before the firecrackers go off."

Napoleon reflected for a moment. "If you think it's such a foolproof idea, why don't you serve as decoy?"

"I'm too young," Illya explained.

It was arranged. The only hitch was that Don, April Dancer's escort, had grown intensely attached to her, and she couldn't shake him. Don Wirts was a burly Californian with plenty of money and a lusty passion to see and do everything. He was boisterous, yet innocuous and pliant, and he agreeably escorted her everywhere she directed. But this morning he would be in the way, and it took an act of considerable rudeness to make him go away.

April went to a ladies' room and, as soon as she was out of his sight, rushed into the noisy street of Singapore.

April took a taxi to the docks on Keppel Harbor and got out a few blocks away from the cable office. At 10:30 she saw Napoleon going into the office. He paused a second to look for her and, satisfying himself as he glimpsed her shock of ash-blonde hair, he entered it. Then he emerged after a minute, crossed the street and entered a bar.

April felt uncomfortably exposed here, for it seemed unlikely that a pretty, unescorted lady tourist would hang around the harbor longer than she had to. An hour passed, but at last there were results.

A messenger boy, in white ducks and a greasy, torn undershirt, entered the cable office and exited a second later. He crossed the street, went into the bar, and came out with Napoleon behind him. He looked around to make

sure he wasn't being followed, but April had made herself invisible behind some huge baskets of fish.

Napoleon Solo was ushered to an old English Ford and pushed in unceremoniously. April signaled her taxi, which had been parked up a sidestreet, and she took off after the Ford. She kept a respectable distance behind, but kept a special channel of her communicator open until she was relieved to hear a beeping sound on it. Good. Napoleon had planted a tiny transmitter in the car, and she would not have to keep the car in sight in order to track it down.

Nevertheless April didn't want to lose visual track yet, because she hoped to glimpse the men who had abducted Napoleon. The Ford made its way into the marketplace on the North side of town, where foot traffic was so heavy that the cars bogged down in a sea of orientals.

April observed three men getting out with Napoleon, and she quickly paid off her driver and leaped out of the taxi. She couldn't make out any faces, but by jumping up from time to time she could follow the four men as they wended their way through the throng. Then she got a chance to close in as the foursome ran into some sort of demonstration in the street, and the crowd in front of her momentarily thinned. But just as she was about to exploit her advantage she felt a strong hand close around her arm.

April Dancer's instincts directed her to bring her arm up to break the lock, then grab her assailant around the neck and drop to one knee. But while her nerves were tensing for the judo throw she recognized the voice. It was Don Wirts' drawl. "I thought for sure you'd been carried away by white slavers. I been looking all over creation for you, honey!"

His simple, grinning face blocked her view of Napoleon. "You lug, get out of my way." She thrust him aside and jumped up to see if her quarry were still visible. But Napoleon and his guardians were gone.

If it hadn't been a matter of life or death April would have found Don's expression of injured dismay laughable. And if it weren't so genuine she might have suspected him of engineering this encounter. But no, he wasn't a THRUSH agent. He was simply a well-meaning oaf whose solicitude for her just might bring about the destruction of Singapore.

THREE

THE FIRST THING Napoleon Solo had done when ushered into the English Ford was hook a barbed, miniaturized radio transmitter on the pants of the man next to him. It was practically invisible, but it didn't have to be very big, for all it did was emit a steady beeping. It could do so for weeks. Na-

poleon prayed that the man was not planning to change his clothes immediately.

Seconds after taking this precaution he felt, as he'd expected, the jab of a hypodermic needle in his arm, and without hesitation an anaesthetic—probably sodium pentathol—swept over his consciousness like the waves of the sea.

When he revived he'd been stripped and dressed in a pair of white pajamas. He was on a cot in a cell, looking into the round face of the man bearing the signal transmitter. Napoleon let his eyes wander to the man's pants, and the tiny silver nodule, looking like a feathery seed clinging to the fabric, was still there.

The man pointed a rather lethal-looking Mauser at Napoleon's eyes, and gestured with it towards the open cell door, outside which stood another guard. The agent cleared his head, rose unsteadily, and staggered out.

They led him down a shiny, white-plastered corridor and into a dim chamber with a desk, some chairs, and a circle of oriental guards in white pajamas, the snouts of their Sten guns trained on choice parts of Napoleon's anatomy.

Behind the desk sat a powerfully built man with slanted eyes, straight dark hair, and an expression of monumental confidence.

"Kae Soong, I presume," said Napoleon.

The man smiled. "You would be Mr. Solo, if my dossiers don't deceive me."

Napoleon did not acknowledge.

"Mr. Solo, I would like to know why you have permitted yourself to be trapped."

"I wanted to meet you."

"You now have that pleasure. But am I unduly suspicious in suggesting you have your associates following you?"

"They aren't following me, but I'm sure they're looking for me."

"I prefer to think your organization is not as haphazard as that. Acting on that assumption, I have prepared a welcome for any that dare think my headquarters are an open house." He scanned Napoleon's eyes for a reaction but found none to raise his hopes. "But it is of no consequence. This place will be abandoned tomorrow morning. Our work is done. Mr. Solo, now that you've located me, I imagine you must be brimming with questions."

"Only one. Where is Edward Dacian?"

"In our custody. In fact, he occupies the cell next to yours. If you would like to share his cell, we'll gladly accommodate you. I'm afraid you won't find his company terribly stimulating, however. He's rather dull these days. But he'll liven up, as the saying goes, when he sees the fireworks display we've planned for the city of Singapore."

"I guess it goes without saying that I'm invited too."

"Oh," smiled Kae Soong, "your presence is indispensable to its success. Although if you did miss this one, you would still have an opportunity to see many more around the world. We have a large number of them planned for the near future."

"Then Dacian—"

"Has told us everything." He nodded at his captive as if to conclude the interview. "There is much to be done, so if you'll excuse me—"

He rose, and Napoleon's arms were gripped by the strong hands of two guards. He was led, almost carried, back to the cell block, but this time was thrown into an occupied room. It took a minute to adjust his eyes to the darkness, but when he finally could make out the bundle on the cot next to the far wall he was appalled. The features belonged to Edward Dacian, but the emaciated body and hollow countenance belonged to a survivor of a concentration camp.

FOUR

AFTER IDENTIFYING and introducing herself over the communicator, April told Illya of her progress in locating Napoleon Solo. "I found the car and watched it for four hours, but nobody claimed it. I have someone watching it now, but I can't just sit around and wait. Who knows how long it will be before they go back to the car—and how can we be sure the car belongs to THRUSH at all?"

Illya held silence for a moment, then asked, "What makes you think he attached the transmitter to the car?"

She pursued her lips as if struck by a revelation. "I don't know—I just assumed—"

"Let's assume that's an illogical assumption," Illya said, "and go on from there. We tag cars only when we can't tag people. The reason is obvious. Cars can be abandoned permanently or for long periods of time. So we try to hook our tracers onto individuals. How close are you to the car?"

"A few blocks away."

"Follow the beeps and see if they lead to the car."

April did as Kuryakin suggested, and when she got to the car, where she'd left Don in attendance, she signaled Illya. "I'm ashamed to say it—"

"We don't have time to be ashamed. Follow the signal as far as is safe, then buzz me again when you've located the source. Is that Don still with you?"

"He's looking at me now as if I'm a madwoman."

"Get rid of him immediately."

Don Wirts' mouth was wide open.

"You're a policewoman!" he gasped. "You're a spy, I'll bet. That's why—"

"I've no time to explain," April Dancer said, "but if you want to do

your country a service, continue to watch this car and I'll contact you as soon as I can. If you see anyone get into it, remember what he looks like and follow him. But keep out of trouble."

"Gosh!" he exclaimed, and then added, as April fled down an alleyway, "I hope she's on the good side."

Like a bloodhound baying after a strong scent, April followed the twists of Singapore's streets according to the strengths and weaknesses of the signal on her receiver. The beeping grew louder as she approached what seemed to be a complex of city administration buildings, and when she entered a small plaza the intensity of the beeps confirmed that she'd closed in on her quarry. Even if she'd had no receiver, the presence of two sinister Chinese outside a two-story, white-brick edifice would have told her she'd found what she was looking for. April communicated her location to Illya.

"Does it look assailable?" he asked.

"There's a steel fence with spikes around the building, two guards in front. No fire escape visible, but I'll go around the back for a look."

"Proceed on your own. I'll await your signal. If I don't hear from you in two hours I'm going to join the party."

She backed out of the alley that led onto the plaza and decided to approach the hideout from another direction. She walked around what she hoped was the perimeter of the plaza, and then headed back in on a narrow street on which small crowds of peasants were engaged in bargaining over fish and vegetables.

Night had settled over the city, and to the south one could see the neon glare of the downtown section. But this area was relatively dim, and the scene was made even more macabre by the whitish glare of gas lamps under which the peasants' wares were displayed.

When April emerged on the plaza she realized she was in a better position to approach the house unseen. A tree towered over the fence, and though it was something of a shinny to get to the lowest branch, she fancied she could do it. She put a dark shawl over her ash-blonde hair and strolled casually past the tree.

As soon as April Dancer was under the branch she leaped up and caught the limb with one hand. Her other hand swiped at it but missed, and she dangled helplessly for a moment. Then her loose hand closed around the bark of the trunk and she lifted herself by dint of her fingernails alone.

Her right arm was stretched to its limit, but now with the boost of her other hand she managed to get some leverage. April's calves and knees and heels pushed downward

until she was reasonably certain a second swipe with her left hand would not be unsuccessful. In one motion she let go of the trunk and grabbed for the limb.

She felt the satisfying thump of the limb in her palm, then pulled with all her might until her torso had cleared the branch. Then April collapsed on it and hung there to catch her breath, looking like a rug placed over a clothesline to be beaten.

As soon as she was able to clear a deep breath, she dropped into the backyard of the house. There was a flagstone patio connected to the house by means of a kind of thatched walk. Stealthily she approached the door at the end of the walk. It was a French door with brass handles, and heavy shades in front of the glass made it impossible for her to see inside.

She tested the knobs, but the door was locked. To an agent teethed on the art of burglary, a locked door presented no problem, and reference to a tool kit skillfully concealed around her waist produced the antidote readily enough.

April Dancer pushed the door open slowly, but as soon as she'd ascertained she was entering a dark room she plunged inside and shut the door behind her. After a few seconds she could ascertain the outlines of a laboratory. She tiptoed to the door on the other side of the room, peeked out, and

saw two armed guards outside a door.

From behind that door April could make out the unmistakable voice of Napoleon Solo. At length it opened and he was led out down a corridor, and, from what her ears could tell her, down a stairway.

She waited a few minutes and was about to decide on her next move when an acquired sense told her she was making a mistake. The entry into the house had been too easy. It just didn't make sense that an operation of cataclysmic magnitude would be so shoddily protected.

April tiptoed back to the French doors and peered out. Her heart thumped violently as she saw that her suspicions were correct. There was a veritable cordon of white-clad orientals around the house.

She reasoned that the room from which Napoleon Solo had been led away was an interrogation room and possibly the office where a key THRUSH agent—possibly even Kae Soong himself—was ensconced. If so there was only one possible way of getting out of this place with Napoleon. She'd have to take a high-ranking hostage.

The move was daring. Its beauty was in its very audacity. The interrogation room was guarded by two big men with sub-machine-guns, and heavens knew how many men were behind the door. She would have to rely on the element of surprise.

April Dancer fitted a silencer over a .32 pistol, and in her left hand she clutched a tear-gas capsule of the kind just issued by U.N.C.L.E.—instant and potent.

She flung open the door and squeezed off two shots in one deadly fluid motion. The two guards scarcely lifted their guns before her bullets slammed into their vitals. Even as they were crumpling to the floor April was charging across the corridor and bursting through the door they guarded.

Kae Soong was sitting behind his desk, and behind him stood a minor assistant in the process of unfurling a chart. As she charged into the room Kae's hand darted automatically for an automatic on his desk, but April's gun was blazing and kicked up a hail of splinters that made him pull back in fright. He turned to his assistant, but this diminutive Malaccan was already reeling from a bullet in the chest.

Kae Soong glared at her. "You are mad!"

"Never mind the formalities. Take me immediately to my friend or I'll drop you right now."

"This is a futile gesture," he sighed, edging from behind his desk. "We've admitted you intentionally, but the doors have shut firmly behind you. You cannot escape. Do with me what you like."

As she stepped over the bodies of the guards in the hall she said, "They need you, Kae Soong, and without you this operation is going to fall on its face."

"I'm afraid nothing could be further from the truth. You people never comprehend how lightly we weigh an individual life against the survival of the organization. Nothing would be impaired, nothing delayed by my removal."

"Then suppose I remove you right now," April said, thrusting the snout of her gun's silencer in his spine.

"You're welcome to do so, but I don't think you will, since I am your passport."

They passed through the door to the stairwell, where she'd seen them take Napoleon.

The stairs curved away to the left, and she cautiously made her way down with her hostage in front of her.

At the foot of the stairs was a corridor with four doors of heavy steel facing on it. At the end of it was a guard, and April could assume that just inside this doorway there would be another. A beam of light across it told her an electric eye would set off an alarm as soon as she crossed it.

She poked Kae Soong and pointed at the beam.

As he called out to the guard nearest them to turn off the beam she quickly reloaded her gun and removed from her kit four sodium vapor explosive charges. The guard acknowledged Kae Soong's order and the beam went out. April shoved her captive forward and as soon as he was clear she squeezed a bullet into the near guard, then into the one at the far end of the corridor.

As the latter spun around from the impact he fell across a beam at that station and an alarm bell sent strident signals throughout the building.

"Which one?" she demanded of Kae Soong, pointing to the four doors of the cells. The THRUSH agent looked at her stonily. "All right, we'll do it this way." She slapped a charge on the lock of each door, then triggered an ignition mechanism.

A few seconds later the corridor was rocked by four blasts like the sound of a wrecker's ball falling on the beam of a ship. The metal doors were blown off their hinges and hung from their frames at bizarre angles. For a moment no one emerged from any of them. April Dancer peered into the first two, which were empty.

Then Napoleon Solo, shaking his head, staggered out of the third.

In a glance he realized what had happened and rushed back into his cell to get Dacian. April, meanwhile, went to the fourth cell but it too was empty.

The corridor was filled with acrid smoke and the alarm bell made an intimidating din. Kae Soong stood passively, doing all he could to resist his captor without risking his murder and waiting for a chance to outsmart them. Napoleon came out of his cell bearing Dacian in a fireman's carry.

April Dancer pressed into Napoleon's free hand another vapor bomb and a tear-gas capsule and, shoving the reluctant Kae Soong ahead of them, went back up the stairs. But they were halfway up when the door at the top opened and they were confronted by an arsenal of machineguns. The tapping of footsteps behind them meant that Kae's goons had come down the other stairwell and would soon be behind them.

Napoleon Solo threw his tear-gas capsule down at the foot of the stairs and it burst into foul-smelling fumes. April shoved her gun deep into Kae's back and ordered him to tell his men to clear a path or she would shoot him at once.

Kae Soon called out, but his command brought forth an explosion of gas that felt as if a rod had been shoved into their brains.

April saw Napoleon's knees buckle, and realized that Kae had ordered his men to gas them all, including himself, but before she could pull the trigger the sickly sweet odor carried her off into a world of nightmares.

ACT VII

LAST ANSWER

WHEN WAVERLY told Illya Kuryakin to forget about Napoleon, the agent's throat constricted as if he was going to cry. "But, sir—"

"Mr. Kuryakin, I'm quite well aware of his value to this organization, but like any other member he is expendable if circumstances call for his sacrifice. The reason I enjoined you from teaming up is that I cannot afford to lose both of you.

"It would be a pity if we have lost him and Miss Dancer, but it would be calamitous if we tossed you into the bargain too. You must leave them to fight their way out of imprisonment alone. But I want you free to act on an instant's notice in a matter infinitely larger. I expect news from our satellite momentarily. So please stand by and do nothing about Mr. Solo or Miss Dancer. That is an order."

Illya Kuryakin collapsed into an armchair. It was almost dawn and he'd been awaiting a signal from Napoleon or April for three hours.

This perhaps was the ugliest aspect of the work he had to do. In U.N.C.L.E.'s struggle against those who would diminish the value of human life, it was sometimes overlooked that an U.N.C.L.E. agent had to hold life cheap indeed in order to protect the interests of order. What value was law and world tranquillity if those defending it had to stand by helplessly as their closest friends were thrown without compunction into the breach?

He was desperately tired, and took advantage of his momentary inactivity to close his eyes and catch some sleep. It seemed as if only a few moments had gone by when the strong sunlight of morning and an insistent signal from his communicator awakened him. He was also conscious of the sounds of shouting and running outside. He switched on his communicator, as he spoke into it, he sidled to the window to see what the commotion was about.

The scene was one of incredible confusion. People were scurrying in every direction, screaming and shouting and shoving each other down.

The voice on his comunicator was that of Alexander Waverly. "Our satellite has picked up an infra-red disturbance on the island of

Singapore. This is it, Mr. Kuryakin."

"Evidently the populace knows something's going on. There's a riot here."

"The Boruvian Federation has issued a twenty-four hour ultimatum. Singapore must join or it will be little more than a pool of lava."

"Have you pinpointed the volcano box?"

"Yes. It's located on a high point at the center, a hill called Bukit Timah. I'll give you the coordinates now."

Waverly read a precise set of longitudinal and latitudinal figures, then added, "The best way to reach it promptly is by helicopter to the north. There's a plateau about half mile away from the summit. The rest must be covered by foot. If you get any closer by helicopter you risk being shot down—if there's anyone there to shoot at you."

"Do you think they've just left the device there and abandoned it?"

"It could be. They don't know we have a way of detecting their device, so they may feel they can switch it on and leave it unattended without fear of discovery until it's too late. On the other hand, if they've issued an ultimatum they must reason that a capitulation by Singapore will make destruction of the island unnecessary.

"So, unless they can shut their device off by remote control, they

may remain behind to stop its operation manually. That makes more sense anyway, because if Singapore does capitulate, THRUSH will want to dismantle the device and remove it. So I think you can expect a welcoming committee. Arm yourself accordingly."

"Yes, sir."

"One last point. We still don't know if THRUSH has the formula for the reflecting elements or not, so it is still in our interest to capture someone who can tell us. Therefore you must not destroy the volcano box site wholesale if there are important personnel there. In brief, you've got to stop the device from going off, but at the same time learn if the formula has fallen into their hands."

Illya Kuryakin shook his head at the incredibly delicate maneuvering he'd have to do to accomplish both goals, and accomplish

them alone, and accomplish them within less than twenty-four hours.

"Will do," he said, concealing his lack of conviction from his superior officer.

TWO

As closely as he could figure, Napoleon Solo awoke from his gas-induced sleep about four hours after his attempt to break out of the prison beneath the laboratory. The sun was thirty degrees up into the eastern sky, from what he could gather looking out of the slit in a wildly bouncing panel truck. Beside him, jammed awkwardly into a corner on her stomach, was April Dancer, her hair tousled. At his feet was the half-broken body of Edward Dacian.

The truck was progressing uphill over unpaved land, and sometimes soared so high over a bump that the three bodies hung suspended for a moment before striking the metal floor. The ride lasted another half hour. Then the truck stopped and the rear doors were opened. Two guards menaced them with sub-machineguns while two more entered and dragged them out, testing the stiff cord that bound their hands behind their backs.

As the guards set them on their feet they observed their surroundings. They were about fifty yards below the summit of a high hill from which rose, as if out of a chimney, a geyser of steam. The steam was discolored grey, but from time to time as they gazed at it it would bear up in its midst some vividly colored cloud of vapor, like a metal being subjected to the flame of a bunsen burner. The odor was sulfurous, the sound at once a humming, a hissing, and a roaring that grew louder even as they stood still.

The guards appeared somewhat awed and frightened, but they prodded Napoleon Solo and April Dancer upwards, while a third helped Dacian.

After a few moments they had made their way through the scrub at the top of the hill, and saw the volcano box site. At the center of course was the scaffolding and box, but these were almost entirely obscured by steam and smoke. Near them, a couple of helicopters stood with rotors whirling, fanning the steam into hideously lovely patterns. Opposite, a couple of rough huts contained what Napoleon surmised were electrical generating equipment and monitoring systems.

And directly in front of them was the smiling face of Kae Soong.

"My colleagues revived me early so that I could be present at the start of the performance. But you will have the envious distinction of being present at the end of it, while I will be far away. Place them there," he instructed a guard, pointing at the huts.

The guard led Dacian and the

two U.N.C.L.E. agents, and made them stand in front of one from which came the throaty sound of a generator. Cables led from it to the steam-shrouded scaffolding. Kae Soong issued some commands, then entered the other hut, which was presumably where the monitors were housed.

When he came out he said, "Another half day and this island will be no more. And after that, who knows? We are so excited with our toy, we don't know what to do with it first."

The wind shifted momentarily and they were drenched in pungent mist. When the breeze abated, Kae Soong was gone and could be seen walking towards one of his engineers. Then Napoleon Solo felt a rough hand on his shoulder. A guard was ordering them to sit against an outcropping of rock near the generator hut. They did so, and the guard took a stance against a tree, watching them intensely and muscles tensed as if eager for an excuse to cut them down.

Napoleon sat between April and Dr. Dacian. He murmured to April, hoping the guard wouldn't make out what he was saying in the hiss and roar of the volcano box.

"If the wind blows that steam our way again we may have a chance."

"I've been thinking the same, but we still have to get our hands free."

"We can rush the guard with our hands tied. A couple of well-placed heads and knees will take care of him. Then I'll tell you what to do."

Napoleon whispered the rest of his instructions, then braced his legs for a leap the moment the wind shifted. Dacian lay inert, eyes glazed and barely comprehending. Napoleon realized it didn't matter how the scientist came out of this ordeal, dead or alive; his spirit had been broken, and Napoleon had rescued him as much for humanitarian as for strategic reasons.

"What if the wind doesn't shift again?" April asked, thrusting her nose into the fairly stiff prevailing wind that carried the smoke of the blossoming volcano away from them.

"Then we pray that the earth under Singapore is made of green cheese."

Suddenly one of the guards shouted and pointed at the northern sky, and other guards joined in the commotion. Kae Soong came running to a vantage point on the hill and peered across a valley. Napoleon craned his neck to see, but the smoke and steam obscured his view.

"It's a chopper," April said.

"Huh?"

"I hear a helicopter. And I don't think it's one of theirs."

THREE

ILLYA KURYAKIN hovered over a ridge half a mile north of Bukit Timah. The problems were mani-

fold. The only approach to the hill, on the ground, was from the north ridge. All other ground lay below the summit, putting him at an impossible disadvantage since he wouldn't be able to see the device's scaffolding and would be an easy target for marksmen commanding the heights. Air attack was out of the question, because he couldn't get close enough to use his weapons effectively without risking ground fire that would knock him out of the sky.

So it would have to be the north ridge, but that's precisely where the pall of steam and smoke was being blown. Visibility from that approach was almost zero, meaning he'd have to make his way practically to the scaffolding itself to destroy it. It was certain he'd have, as Waverly put it, a welcoming committee long before he got that close.

If only they'd let him blast the summit indiscriminately!

But that might be a fatal mistake. U.N.C.L.E. had to learn with certainty whether THRUSH had the formula for the chief component of the device, and the only way that could be done was either to capture a THRUSH agent or rescue Dr. Dacian.

Illya Kuryakin had no idea whether Dacian was dead or alive, but he was haunted by the realization that the scientist, along with Napoleon Solo and April Dancer, were alive and being held hostage on the summit of Bukit Timah. So he had no choice but to try threading the needle—destroying the volcano box, capturing a THRUSH agent, seeking and rescuing his friends if they were there at all—and keeping himself alive in the bargain.

He shrugged, as if the mission was so ridiculous it had to succeed.

Then Illya set the helicopter down on a granite plateau and stepped out, keeping the rotors whirling against the likelihood of a fast getaway. He was quickly enveloped in a sweetish, yet acrid and dense steam. Just as serious, a series of whizzes and pings told him he was being shot at. He wasn't worried about small-arms fire damaging him or the helicopter at this range, but he knew now he wouldn't even have the element of surprise to assist him.

Illya reached into the cockpit and dragged out a metal tube about a yard long and a trigger mechanism that looked vaguely like a snub-nosed machine-pistol. Then he pulled out a cannister and a weapon that looked very much like a snub-nosed machine-pistol—and in fact it was.

Then he dived for a clump of greenery as bullets whistled uncomfortably near. He realized he'd underestimated their fire power. Somebody over there had a .50 caliber machinegun. He feared for the helicopter, but a slight shift of wind sent billows of smoke over his

position. Now they were at an equal disadvantage—they couldn't see him and he couldn't see them.

Illya took the tube and trigger mechanism and fitted them together. They formed a one-man bazooka. He reached into the cannister and withdrew a small but potent rocket and fitted it into the chamber. Then, slinging his machine-pistol over his shoulder and carrying the bazooka in one hand and the cannister in the other, he scampered over the ridge until he was about seven hundred yards away.

He still could see nothing through the pall, but waited for a shift of wind which might momentarily reveal the layout and enable him to draw a bead accurately.

Everything seemed now to depend on a shift of the wind. Perversely, an hour went by before he got his chance, and when he did, he blew it. It wasn't so much a shift as simply a cessation. The steam rose straight up, disclosing the scaffolding directly behind some trees a hundred yards in front of the device. Illya could see a gun emplacement off to one side, and beyond it some helicopters and huts. He might have focussed his aim on those, but the scaffolding was of primary importance, and he didn't know how much time he had left or whether the wind would ever give him another chance.

He set the crosshairs of the telescopic sight between the trunks of two trees and hoped to squeeze his shot between them. But as his finger closed around the trigger the wind started up again and rolled the steam towards him.

He pulled the shot off hastily and the ground was rocked with one, then a second explosion. The first was Illya's bazooka, defoliating the clump of trees.

The second was Illya's helicopter. They'd struck the fuel tank.

As the wreckage rained about him he wondered what it would be like to be carried off to heaven on waves of molten lava.

Then he got angry and rushed another hundred yards closer to the target under the obscurity of the smoke. He loaded another charge into the bazooka and waited.

When the wind finally shifted, blowing the steam back over the camp site, Illya was greeted by a hail of machinegun fire that sent him rolling off into some brush. They had him pinned down and he couldn't poke his head up without getting it shot off.

FOUR

AT THE SHIFT of the wind Napoleon Solo and April Dancer moved as if launched by catapult. The steam curled over them like a gigantic white hand as they charged the guard with heads lowered. Napoleon's skull rammed his throat while April's struck his solar plexus.

The guard slammed against a tree, his head smacking violently against it, and he crumpled to earth soundlessly. April, hands behind her back, stooped and picked up the sub-machinegun and held it precariously, aiming it where she thought trouble might come from.

Napoleon Solo rushed for the generator hut, which was unguarded as Soong had sent all available manpower to the north side of the hill to try to get Illya Kuryakin.

The reed door of the hut gave easily, and Napoleon saw the throbbing generator, painted bright orange, at his feet. He turned his back to it and held his bonds away from his body, then started backing towards the whirring rubber fan belt. Delicately he placed the cords around his wrists against the belt, then pressed them harder and harder until the rubber whined on the cord.

The smell of burning fiber added its pungency to the foul odors coming from the volcano rig. Ten seconds passed, and then the cord frayed and snapped so suddenly Napoleon almost thrust his hands into the generator itself.

Hands free, he rushed outside, took the gun from April and ran back to the generator with her. He cut her bonds the same way, then ordered her to drag Dacian to a safe place. As she rushed out, Napoleon Solo trained his gun on the cables leading to the rig and fired.

The cables snapped and the hot

ends, closest to the generator, began writhing like electric eels. He moved to the door and, trying to shield himself from richocheting bullets, fired at the generator itself, cutting the fan belt and sending slugs into the machine's vital elements. It sputtered, faltered, and whirled to a stop, cutting off the electricity to Dacian's device.

He ran out of the hut in time to see April dragging Dr. Dacian into a clearing on the south side of the hill. From the opposite side he heard the chatter of machineguns. Cautiously he made his way towards it until he could make out the shapes of half a dozen white-clad men training their fire on an outcropping.

Napoleon Solo automatically leveled his gun on them and raked their position with fire. Four of them slumped over their guns. One whirled around to confront Napoleon but was chopped down instantly. The last flung himself over his entrenchment and disappeared, presumably to seek a better position.

A bullet winged close to Napoleon. It came from the helicopters.

Four men, of which Kae Soong was one, were rushing for the machines and spraying fire at Napoleon to cover their escape. He dived for the ground, and just as he did he was lifted bodily from the earth by the impact of a tremendous explosion, then slammed down again, his ears ringing.

All about Solo were falling hot pieces of metal. He rolled to his left under the truck that had carried him to the top of the hill. The truck echoed resoundingly as it was struck a dozen times by fragments from the explosion. Napoleon peered out and saw a mass of tangled rigging where the volcano box had been. Steam swirled around it, but it seemed to have diminished over its previous intensity.

Then he heard the whirling of helicopter motors. He rolled out from under the truck and swore. One of the THRUSH choppers was lifting off the ground. He raised his machinegun and fired, aiming for the pilot, but it faded quickly away from the hill top.

The other chopper was waiting, rotors whirling, while a burly man, limping perceptibly, was assisted inside. It was Kae Soong. The man had either received a superficial leg wound during the late unpleasantness or had sprained his ankle in the process of fleeing.

Without hope, Napoleon Solo triggered a blast at him, but the bullet-proof door had slammed closed. Already the whirlybird was leaving the ground in a swirl of dust.

Out of nowhere, he remembered what Waverly had once told him.

"Bringing down one of those with ground fire is an act of God, plus a lot of luck," Waverly had said. "But if you ever have to try, forget the men; aim for the base of the rotors. You've got one chance in maybe a thousand to hit it. But if you do it's big casino."

For a moment the slanted angle of the copter's rise had the exact base of the rotors out of sight and by the time it had veered back again a lot of distance had come between them.

Grimly, Napoleon Solo sighted for the slim base and poured the last of his clip out into the empty air.

He was shaking his head in futile rage when he heard Illya's shout. What he saw made him tense, unbelieving.

Directly under the whirling rotors a spot of flame, no bigger than a tennis ball, had flowered. While he watched, it spread to the size of a soccer ball, turned bright scarlet.

Whoosh!

Like an evil flower, the entire machine was enveloped in that scarlet curtain. Through it Napoleon Solo could see the men inside leaping around in panic. And directly after that the world exploded, so violently that he could feel the concussion of the blast even at that distance.

The copter was no more. And of the men in it, scattered bits of clothing and worse were plummeting down through the flames.

Illya Kuryakin said, "I've seen worse shots, Deadeye."

Napoleon nodded. He felt very tired, very humble. Together they went across the plain to see what was left.

The four of them gaped into the still-steaming shaft. Then they walked to the other side of the hill and awaited the rescue copters, which Illya Kuryakin had called in on his communicator, to arrive.

Napoleon was grinning, but Illya looked dejected. "What's the matter?" he asked his Russian companion.

"Everything. That other copter got away and maybe with the formula. We're quite possibly worse off than before.

"Now it's not just Singapore. It's anywhere and everywhere. They'll be planting these devices like rice grains."

"No they won't," said Dr. Dacian weakly.

"Why not?" April Dancer asked.

"Because I gave them a false formula."

They sighed, then lay back and looked at the sun breaking through the steam-cloud over the hill. Suddenly April sat up, her eyes round with horror. "Oh gosh!"

"What is it?" they asked all at the same time.

"It's the end of the world!"

They looked at her gravely, as if they'd left out some vital factor in their considerations.

"I left poor Don Wirts watching that car," she exclaimed. "He must still be there. We must get to him right away."

They laughed, and turned their eyes south as the black specks of friendly helicopters materialized on the horizon.

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Please print **November—67**

HELLSGARDE
by C. L. MOORE

JIREL of Joiry drew rein at the edge of the hill and sat awhile in silence, looking out and down. So this was Hellsgarde. She had seen it many times in her mind's eye as she saw it now from the high hill in the yellow light of sunset that turned every pool of the marshes to shining glass. The long causeway to the castle stretched out narrowly between swamps and reeds up to the gate of that grim and eery fortress set alone among the quicksands. This same castle in the marshes, seen at evening from the high hilltop, had haunted her dreams for many nights now.

"You'll find it by sunset only, my lady," Guy of Garlot had told her with a sidelong grin marring

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DEPARTMENT of LOST STORIES

A previously published story is not necessarily a permanently preserved story, available to everyone. Too often, in fact, it is just the opposite. So transitory is magazine publication alone—usually thirty days on sale—that far too many outstanding tales are overlooked and forgotten before they have their deserved chance to become famous. For many years this very real loss of talent and deserved fame has troubled us, so much that we have decided to do something about it. And this magazine, "The Man from U.N.C.L.E.," because of its very freshness and unconventional approach, would seem to be the perfect medium in which to do it. From time to time, therefore, in this magazine, you will see the Department of Lost Stories. *When you do, read with care and discrimination. You will be reading a story which, whatever its field, whoever its author, has been revered and remembered as too good to be forgotten. We are particularly fortunate this issue to be able to include a novelette by C. L. Moore—or Catherine Kuttner—the charming and talented widow of the late, great Henry Kuttner. Both wrote prodigiously for* Weird Tales *and were even more famous for science fiction. Read this story. You will not soon forget it!*

THE EDITORS

Somewhere in the darkness the Thing that had been Andred guarded his dreadful treasure. She must have it—whatever the price!

his comely dark face. "Mists and wilderness ring it round, and there's magic in the swamps about Hellsgarde. Magic—and worse, if legends speak truth. You'll never come upon it save at evening."

Sitting her horse now on the hilltop, she remembered the grin in his black eyes and cursed him in a whisper. There was such a silence over the whole evening world that by instinct she dared not speak aloud. Dared not? It was no normal silence. Bird-song did not break it, and no leaves rustled. She huddled her shoulders together a little under the tunic of link-mail she wore and prodded her horse forward down the hill.

Guy of Garlot—Guy of Garlot!

The hoofbeats thumped out the refrain all the way downhill. Black Guy with his thinly smiling lips and his slanted dark eyes and his unnatural comeliness—unnatural because Guy, within, was ugly as sin itself.

The horse hesitated at the head of the causeway which stretched between the marsh pools toward Hellsgarde. Jirel shook the reins impatiently and smiled a one-sided smile downward at his twitching ears.

And she cursed Guy again in a lingering whisper as the slow hoofbeats reverberated upon the stone arches of the causeway.

Beyond it loomed Hellsgarde, tall and dark against the sunset. She wondered who last had ridden this deserted causeway in the yellow glow of sunset, under what dreadful compulsion.

For no one sought Hellsgarde for pleasure. It was Guy of Garlot's slanting grin that drove Jirel across the marshes this evening—Guy and the knowledge that a score of her best men-at-arms lay shivering tonight in his dripping dungeons with no hope of life save the hope that she might buy their safety. And no riches could tempt Black Guy, not even Jirel's smoothly curving beauty and the promise of her full-lipped smile. Only one thing could tempt the dark lord of Garlot, and that a thing without a name.

"It lies in Hellsgarde, my lady," he had told her with that hateful smooth civility which his sleek grin so belied. "And it is indeed Hellguarded. Andred of Hellsgarde died defending it two hundred years ago, and I have coveted it all my life. But I love living, my lady! I would not venture into Hellsgarde for all the wealth in Christendom. If you want your men back alive, bring me the treasure that Andred died to save."

"But what is it, coward?"

Guy had shrugged. "Who knows? Whence it came and what it was no man can say now. You know the tale as well as I, my lady. He carried it in a leather casket locked with an iron key. It must have been small—but very precious. Precious enough to die for, in the end—as I do not propose to die, my lady! You fetch it to me and buy twenty lives in the bargain."

She had sworn at him for a coward, but in the end she had gone. For after all, she was Jairy. Her men were hers to bully and threaten and command, but they were hers to die for too, if need be.

The causeway was so long. Sunset had begun to tarnish a little in the bright pools of the marsh, and she could look up at the castle now without being blinded by the dazzle beyond. A mist had begun to rise in level layers from the water, and the smell of it was not good in her nostrils.

Hellsgarde—Hellsgarde and An-

dred. She did not want to remember the hideous old story, but she could not keep her mind off it this evening. Andred had been a big, violent man, passionate and wilful and very cruel. Men hated him, but when the tale of his dying spread abroad even his enemies pitied Andred of Hellsgarde.

For the rumor of his treasure had drawn at last besiegers whom he could not overcome. Hellsgarde gate had fallen and the robber nobles who captured the castle searched in vain for the precious casket which Andred guarded. Torture could not loosen his lips.

He was a powerful man, stubborn and brave. He lived a long while under torment, but he would not betray the hiding-place of his treasure.

They tore him limb from limb at last and cast his dismembered body into the quicksands, and came away empty-handed. No one ever found Andred's treasure.

Since then for two hundred years Hellsgarde had lain empty. In the two hundred years searchers had gone fearfully to ransack the empty halls of Hellsgarde for that casket —gone, and vanished. There was magic in the marshes, and a man could come upon the castle only by sunset, and after sunset Andred's violent ghost rose out of the quicksands to guard the thing he died for.

Jirel was drawing near the gateway. There was a broad platform before it, just beyond the place where Andred's drawbridge had once barred the approach to Hellsgarde. Long ago the gap in the causeway had been filled in with rubble by searchers who would reach the castle on horseback, and she had thought of passing the night upon that platform under the gate arch, so that dawn might find her ready to begin her search.

But—the mists between her and the castle had thickened, and her eyes might be playing her false —but were not those the shapes of men drawn up in a double row before the doorway of Hellsgarde? Hellsgarde, that had stood empty and haunted these two hundred years?

She rode on toward the gateway. She could feel the horse trembling between her knees, and with every step he grew more and more reluctant to go on. She set her teeth and forced him ahead.

They *were* the figures of men, two rows of them, waiting motionless before the gate. But even through the mist and the sun-dazzle she could see that something was wrong. They were so still—so unearthly still as they faced her. And the horse was shying and trembling until she could scarcely force him forward.

She was quite near before she saw what was wrong, though she knew that at every forward step the obscure frightfulness about these guardsmen grew greater. But she was almost upon them before she

realized why. They were all dead.

The captain at their front stood slumped down upon the great spear that propped him on his feet, driven through his throat so that the point stood out above his neck as he sagged there, his head dragging forward until his cheek lay against the shaft which transfixed him.

And so stood all the rest, behind him in a double row, reeling drunkenly upon the spears driven through throat or chest or shoulder to prop them on their feet in the hideous semblance of life.

So the company of dead men kept guard before the gateway of Hellsgarde. It was not unfitting—dead men guarding a dead castle in the barren deadlands of the swamp.

Jirel sat her horse before them for a long moment in silence, feeling the sweat gather on her forehead. So far as she knew, no other living person in decades had ridden the long causeway to Hellsgarde; certainly no living man had dwelt in these haunted towers in generations. Yet—here stood the dead men reeling against the spears which had slain them but would not let them fall. Why?

Death was no new thing to Jirel. She had slain too many men herself to fear it. But the ghastly unexpectedness of this dead guard! It was one thing to steel oneself to enter an empty ruin, quite another to face a double row of standing dead men whose blood still ran in dark rivulets, wetly across the stones at their feet. Still wet—they had died today, then. Could the dead Andred have known——?

She caught herself with a little shudder and shrugged beneath the mail, clenching her fingers on the pommel, swallowing hard. *Remember your men—remember Guy of Garlot—remember that you are Joiry!* The memory of Guy's comely face, bright with mockery, put steel into her and she snapped her chin up. These men were dead—they could not hinder her. . . .

Was that motion among the ghastly guard? Her heart leaped to her throat and she gripped the saddle between nervous knees with a reflex action that made the horse shudder. For one of the men in the row before her was slipping silently toward the flagstones. Had a breeze dislodged his precarious balance? There was no breeze.

But with a curious little sigh from collapsing lungs he folded gently downward to his knees, to his side, to a flattened proneness on the stones. And a dark stream of blood trickled from his mouth to snake across the pavement as he lay there.

Jirel sat frozen. It was a nightmare. Only in nightmares could such things happen.

A harsh scraping sounded beyond the dead guardsmen. Her heart squeezed itself to a stop. And then the blood began to thunder through her veins and her heart leaped and fell and leaped again in

a frenzied pounding against the mail of her tunic.

For beyond the men the great door of Hellsgarde was swinging open. She made no move toward the great sword at her side. What use is a sword against dead men?

But it was no dead man who looked out under the arch of the doorway, stooped beneath his purple tunic with the heartening glow of firelight from beyond reddening his bowed shoulders. There was something odd about his pale, pinched face upturned to hers across the double line of dead defenders between them. After a moment she recognized what it was —he had the face of a hunchback, but there was no deformity upon his shoulders.

"Good evening to you, my lady," said the hunchback (but he was not humped) in the flat, ingratiating voice of a cripple.

"*These*—did not find it good," said Jirel shortly, gesturing.

The man grinned. "My master's jest," he said.

Jirel looked back to the rows of standing dead. "Your master?" she echoed.

"My lord Alaric of Hellsgarde—you did not know?"

"Know what?" demanded Jirel flatly. She was beginning to dislike the fellow's sidelong unctuousness.

"Why, that my lord's family has

taken residence here after many generations away."

"Sir Alaric is of Andred's kin?" she said.

"He is."

Jirel shrugged mentally. It was God's blessing to feel the weight of terror lift from her, but this would complicate matters. She had not known that Andred left descendants, though it might well be so. And if they lived here, then be sure they would already have ransacked the castle from keep to dungeon for that nameless treasure which Andred had died to save. Had they found it? There was only one way to learn that.

"I am nighted in the marshes," she said. "Will your master give me shelter until morning?"

The hunchback's eyes—(but he was no hunchback, she must stop thinking of him so!)—his eyes slid very quickly, yet very comprehensively, from her tanned and red-lipped face downward over the lifting curves of her under the molding chain-mail, over her bare brown knees and slim, steel-greaved legs.

There was a deeper unctuousness in his voice as he said; "My master will make you very welcome, lady. Ride in."

Jirel kicked her horse's flank and guided him, snorting and trembling, through the gap in the ranks of dead men which the falling soldier had left. He was a battle-charger, he was used to dead men; yet he shuddered as he minced through these lines.

The courtyard within was warm with the light of the great fire in its center. Around it a cluster of loutish men in leather jerkins looked up as she passed.

"Wat, Piers—up, men!" snapped the man with the hunchback's face. "Take my lady's horse."

Jirel hesitated a moment before she swung from the saddle, her eyes dubious upon the faces around her. She thought she had never seen such brutish men before, and she wondered at the lord who dared employ them. Her own followers were tough enough, reckless, hard fellows without fear or scruple. But at least they were men. These louts around the fire seemed scarcely more than beasts.

She wondered with what threats of punishment the lord Alaric held sway here, what sort of man he must be to draw his guard from the very dregs of humanity.

Her eyes were busy. Hellsgarde had been a strong fortress in Andred's day; under Alaric it was well manned, but she thought she sensed a queer, hovering sullenness in the very air as she followed her guide across the courtyard, down a passageway, under an arch into the great hall.

The shadows of two hundred haunted years hovered under the lofty roof-beams. It was cold here, damp with the breath of the swamps outside, dark with two cen-

turies of ugly legend and the terrible tradition of murder. But Alaric before the fire in his scarlet tunic seemed pleasantly at home. The great blaze roaring up the chimney from six-foot logs drove back the chill and the dark and the damp a little in a semicircle about the fireplace, and in that semicircle a little company of brightly clad people sat silent, watching Jirel and her guide cross the echoing flags of the great hall toward them.

It was a pleasant scene, warm and firelit and bright with color, but even at a distance, something was wrong—something in the posture of the people crouching before the blaze, something in their faces.

Jirel knew a moment of wild wonder if all this were real. Were the people flesh and blood, or only the bright shadows of her own imagination?

But no, there was nothing illusive about Alaric in his high-backed chair, his face a pale oval watching her progress. A humped dwarf leaned above his shoulder, fingers suspended over his lute-strings as he stared. On cushions and low benches by the fire a handful of women and girls, two young boys in bright blue, a pair of greyhounds with the firelight scarlet in their eyes—these made up the rest of the company.

Jirel's narrow yellow gaze summed them up as she crossed the hall. Striding smoothly in her thigh-length hauberk, she knew she was a figure on which a man's eyes must linger. Her supple height, the pleasant smooth curves of her under mail, the long, shapely legs bare beneath the linked metal of her hauberk, the swinging of the long sword whose weight upon its belt pulled in her waist to tigerish slimness—Alaric's eyes missed nothing of all these.

Deliberately she tossed the dark cloak back over her shoulders, letting the firelight take the sleek mailed curves of her in a bright glimmer, flash from the shining greaves that clasped her calves. It was not her way to postpone the inevitable. Let Alaric learn in his first long stare how splendid a creature was Joiry's lady. And as for those women at his feet—well, let them know too.

She swaggered to a halt before Alaric, resting a hand on her sword-hilt, tossing back the cloak that had swirled about her as she swung to a stop. His face, half in the shadow of the chair, tilted up to her leanly.

Here was no burly brute of a man such as she had half expected on the evidence of the men-at-arms he kept. He was of middle years, his face deeply grooved with living, his nose a hawk-beak, his mouth a sword-gash.

And there was something oddly wrong with his features. With a little twist of the heart she saw what it was. There was no physical likeness between master and men in any feature, but the shadow of

deformity lay upon all three faces, though only the hunchback wore it honestly.

Perhaps, Jirel thought with a small shudder, the master and the courtier as well as the fool did indeed carry a burden, and if they did she thought she would prefer the jester's to theirs. His at least was honest and of the flesh. But theirs must be of the spirit. It was a deformity of the soul that looked out of the eyes meeting hers.

And because the thought frightened her, she flashed her white teeth in a smile more boldly reckless than the girl behind it felt.

"You must not crave the company of strangers, sir—you keep a discouraging guard before your gate!"

Alaric did not smile. "Honest travelers are welcome here," he said very smoothly. "But the next robbers who ride our causeway will think twice before they storm the gates. We have no gallows here where thieves may swing in chains, but I think the guard before my castle will be warning enough to the next raiders who come."

"A grisly sort of warning," said Jirel. And then, with belated courtesy, "I am Jirel of Joiry. I missed my way in the marsh tonight—I shall be grateful for your hospitality."

"And we for your presence, Lady Jirel."

Alaric's voice was oily, but his eyes raked her openly. She felt other eyes upon her back too. "We keep a small court here at Hellsgarde," went on Alaric's voice. "Damara, Ettard, Isoud, Morgaine—all of you, make our guest welcome!"

Jirel swung round with a swirl of her long cloak to face the women, wondering at the subtle slight to their dignity, for Alaric made no effort to introduce them separately.

She thought they crouched a little on their low seats by the fire, looking up with the queer effect of women peering fearfully from under lowered brows, though she could not have said why they seemed so, for they met her eyes squarely. And upon these faces too lay that strange shadow of deformity, not so definitely as upon the men's, but visible in the firelight.

The woman who had risen when Alaric said "Damara" was as tall as Jirel, strongly made under her close green gown, but her face too had that queerly hollow look and her eyes stared too whitely under wide-open lids.

She said in a tight voice; "Sit down by the fire and warm yourself, lady. We dine in a few minutes."

Jirel sank to the low cushioned stool she dragged forward, one leg doubled under her for instant rising, her swordhilt and sword-hand free. There was something wrong here. She could feel it in the air.

The two dogs growled a little and shifted away from her on the floor,

and even that was wrong. Dogs had fawned on her always—until now. And the firelight was so red in their eyes.

Looking away uneasily from those unnaturally red eyes, Jirel saw the boys' features clearly for the first time, and her heart contracted a little. For naked evil was upon these two young faces. It might be only a trick of her legend-fed imagination that put evil there, but the two young lads had the faces of devils, long faces with high cheekbones and slitted, lusterless eyes.

Jirel shuddered. What sort of company had she stumbled into, where the very children and dogs wore evil like a garment?

She drew a deep breath and glanced around the circle of still faces that watched.

Joiry squared her cleft chin and said with determined casualness; "You have dwelt here long?"

She could have sworn a look went round the semicircle before the fire, a swift, amused glance from face to face as if they shared a secret. Yet not an eye wavered from hers. Only the two boys leaned together a little, and the look of evil brightened upon their faces.

Alaric answered after the briefest possible pause; "Not long. Nor will we stay long—now."

There was a subtle menace in it, though Jirel could not have said why. And again that feeling of knowledge shared ran like a strong current around the circle, a little quiver as if a dreadful amusement were almost stirring in the air. But not a face changed or turned. The eyes were still eager—almost avid—upon the bright, strong face of Jirel.

She had the sudden feeling that dark robes and dark eyes and dark faces hemmed her in, like shadows around a fire.

To conquer the little tremor she could not quite ignore she said boldly, "Hellsgarde of the Marshes has an ugly reputation, my lord. I wonder you dare dwell here—or do you know the old tale?"

Unmistakably this time that quiver of amusement flashed around the circle.

Alaric's voice was dry as he answered, "Yes—yes, we know the tale. We are—not afraid."

And suddenly Jirel was quite sure of a strange thing. Something in his voice and his words told her very surely that they had not come in spite of the terrible old legend, but *because of it*.

The conversation had stopped again. To break the nerve-racking silence Jirel said, "We hear many strange tales of Hellsgarde"—and knew she was talking too much, but could not stop—anything was better than that staring silence—"tales of treasure and—and—is it true that one can come upon Hellsgarde Castle only in the sunset—as I did?"

Alaric paused deliberately for a moment before he answered. "There are stranger tales than that of Hellsgarde—and who can say how much of truth is in them? Treasure? There may well be treasure here. Many have come seeking it—and remained, for ever."

Jirel remembered the dead men at the door, and she shot Alaric a yellow glare that would have clanged like the meeting of blades with his stare—had he met it. He was looking up into the shadows of the ceiling, and he was smiling a little.

Jirel remembered Guy of Garlot's smile as he sent her on this quest, and a murderous wonder began to take shape in her mind. If Guy had known—if he had deliberately sent her into this peril—she let herself sink for a moment into a luxury of picturing that comely smile smashed in by the handle of her sword.

They were watching her. She said. "How cold the marshes are after sunset!" And she shivered a little, not until that moment realizing the chill of the great hall.

"We find it—pleasant," murmured Alaric, watching her.

The others were watching too, and again she sensed that ripple of subtle amusement running around the circle that closed her out of a secret shared. They were here for a purpose. A strange, unfathomable purpose that included her now, and in no pleasant way. Danger was in the air. Well, she had been in peril before, and hewed her way out again.

A slovenly wench in a ragged smock tiptoed clumsily out of the shadows to murmur in Damara's ear, and Jirel felt with conscious relief the removal of at least one pair of staring eyes as the woman turned to nod. Jirel's gaze was scornful on the girl. A queer household they kept here—the bestial retainers, the sluttish wench in her soiled gown.

Not even Joiry's kitchen maids went so slovenly clad.

Damara turned back to the fire. "Shall we dine now?" she asked.

Every face around the fire brightened magically, and Jirel was conscious of a little loosening of the tension in her own mind. The very fact that the thought of food pleased them made the whole group seem more normal. And yet—she saw it in a moment—this was not even a normal eagerness. There was something a little horrid about the gleam in every eye, the avid hunger on every face.

Frowsy kitchen scullions and a pair of unwashed girls were carrying in the planks and trestles for the table, setting it up by the fire.

"We dine alone," Alaric was explaining as the group around the fire reshifted itself to make way.

When the table was ready Alaric seated her at his right hand, beside the two evil-faced youngsters who sat preternaturally quiet. Young

lads of that age were scufflers and squirmers at table in the company she knew. It was another count of eeriness against them that they scarcely moved save to reach for food.

Who were they? Jirel wondered. Alaric's sons? Pages or squires from some noble family? She glanced around the table in deepening bewilderment, looking for signs of kinship on the shadowed faces, finding nothing but that twist of deformity to link the company together.

Alaric had made no attempt to introduce any of them. She met the eyes of the dwarf at Alaric's elbow and looked quickly away again, angry at his little comprehending grin. He had been watching her.

There was no conversation after the meat was brought in. The whole company fell upon it with such a starved eagerness that one might think they had not dined in weeks. And not even their food tasted right or normal.

It looked well enough, but there was a subtle seasoning about it that made Jirel lay down her knife after the first taste—a flavor almost of decay, and a sort of burning bitterness she could not put a name to, that lingered on the tongue long after the food itself was swallowed. Everything stank of it, the roast, the bread, the few vegetables, even the bitter wine.

After a brave effort, for she was hungry, Jirel gave up and made not

even the pretense of eating. She sat with her arms folded on the table edge, right hand hanging near her sword, watching the ravenous company devour their tainted food.

It was no wonder, she realized suddenly, that they ate alone. Surely not even the dull palates of their retainers could accept this revoltingly seasoned meat.

Alaric sat back at last in his high-backed chair, wiping his dagger on a morsel of bread.

"You do not hunger, Lady Jirel?" he asked, tilting a brow at her still-heaped trencher. She could not help her little grimace as she glanced down.

"Not now," she said, with wry humor.

Alaric did not smile. He leaned forward to pick up upon his dagger the thick slab of roast before her, and tossed it to the hearth. The two greyhounds streaked from beneath the table to growl over it hungrily. Alaric glanced obliquely at Jirel, with a hint of a one-sided smile, as he wiped the knife again and sheathed it.

When the table had been cleared away and the last glimmer of sunset

had faded from the high, narrow slits of the windows, a sullen fellow in frieze went around the hall with a long pole-torch, lighting the cressets.

"Have you visited Hellsgarde before, my lady?" inquired Alaric. And as Jirel shook her head, "Let me show you the hall then, and my forefathers' arms and shields. Who knows?—you may find quarterings of your own among our escutcheons."

Jirel shuddered at the thought of discovering even a remote kinship with Hellsgarde's dwellers, but she laid her hand reluctantly on the arm he offered and let him lead her away from the fire.

The hall was as Andred's murderers must have left it two centuries ago. What shields and armor had not fallen from the walls were thick with rust in the damp air of the marshes, and the tatters of pennons and tapestries had long ago taken on a uniform color of decay.

Alaric seemed to savor the damp and the desolation as a normal man might savor luxury. Slowly he led her around the hall, and she could feel the eyes of the company, who had resumed their seats by the fire, follow her all the way with one unwinking stare.

The dwarf had taken up his lute again and struck occasional chords in the echoing silence of the hall, but except for that there was no sound but the fall of their feet on the rushless flagstones.

They paused at the side of the big room farthest from the fire, and Alaric said in an unctuous voice, his eyes seeking Jirel's with curious insistence:

"Here on this spot where we stand, lady, died Andred of Hellsgarde two hundred years ago."

Jirel looked down involuntarily. Her feet were planted on the great blotch of a spreading stain that had the rough outline of a beast with questing head and paws outsprawled. It was a broad stain, black and splattered upon the stone. Andred must have been a big man. He had bled terribly on that day two centuries past.

Jirel felt her host's eyes on her face full of a queer anticipation, and she caught her breath a little to speak, but before she could utter a sound, quite suddenly there was a riot of wind all about them, shrieking out of nowhere in a whirlwind gust that came ravening with such fury that the cressets went out all together in one breath and darkness like a blow fell upon the hall.

In the instant of that blackness, while the whole great hall was black and vocal and bewildering with stormwind, as if he had been waiting avidly for this moment all evening a man's arm seized Jirel in a grip like death and a mouth came down upon hers in a more savagely violent, wetly intimate kiss than she had ever known before.

She struggled helplessly against that iron arm and ravenous mouth,

while the storm wind shrieked in the darkness. She was conscious of nothing but the arm, the mouth, the insolent hand. She was not pressed against a man's body, but the strength of the arm was like steel about her.

And in the same moment of the seizure the arm was dragging her violently across the floor with irresistible force, never slackening its crushing grip, the kiss in all its revolting intimacy still ravaging her mouth.

It could not have lasted more than seconds. She had an impression of big, square, wide-spaced teeth against her lips and the queer violence behind them manifest not primarily in the savageness of the embrace, but more as if all these were mere incidents to a burning vehemence behind them that beat like heat all around her.

Choking with impotent fury, she tried to struggle, tried to scream. But there was no chest to push for leverage and no body to arch away from, and she could not resist. She could only make dumb animal sounds in her throat, sealed in behind the storming violation of that mouth.

She had scarcely time to think, it happened so quickly. She was too stunned by the violence and suddenness of the attack even to wonder at the absence of anything but the mouth, the arm, the hand. It was somehow as if that violence beating all about her were confined and made more violent by the presence of close walls very near.

It was all over so soon that even as that feeling of closing walls dawned upon her she heard the little amazed cries of the others as the cressets were blown out all together. It was as if time had moved faster for her than for them. In another instant someone must have thrown brush on the fire, for the great blaze in the cavern of the chimney roared up with a gush of light and sound, for a moment beating back the darkness in the hall.

And Jirel was staggering alone in the center of the big room. No one was near her. Walls did not enclose her; there was no wind, there was no sound in the great hall.

Alaric stood over the black blotch of Andred's blood at the other side of the hall. She thought she must have known subconsciously after the first moment that it was not he whose lips bruised her mouth. That flaming vehemence was not in him. No, though he had been the only man near her when the dark closed down, he was not the man whose outrageous kiss still throbbed on her mouth.

Jirel lifted an unsteady hand to those bruised lips and stared around her, gasping for breath, half sobbing with fury.

The others were still around the fire, half the width of the room away. And as the light from the replenished blaze leaped up, she saw the blankness of their momentary

surprise vanish before one leaping flame of avid hope that for an instant lit every face alike. With long running strides Alaric reached her side. In her dazed confusion she heard him gabbling in a tongue she did not know:

"G'hasta-est? Tai g'hasta? Tai g'hasta?"

Angrily she shook him off as the others closed round her in an eagerly excited group, babbling all together, *"G'hasta tai? Est g'hasta?"*

Alaric recovered his poise first. In a voice shaking with the first emotion she had heard from him he demanded with almost desperate eagerness.

"What was it? What happened? Was it—was it——?" But he seemed scarcely to dare name the thing his whole soul longed for, though the tremble of hope was in his voice.

Jirel caught herself on the verge of answering. Deliberately she paused to fight down the dizzy weakness that still swam in her brain, drooping her lids to hide the calculation that came up like a flame behind her yellow eyes. For the first time she had a leverage over these mysterious people. She knew something they frantically desired to know, and she was determined to make full use of the knowledge.

"H-happened?" The stammer was not entirely feigned. "There was a—a wind, and darkness—I don't know—it was all over so quickly."

And she glanced up into the gloom with not wholly assumed terror. Whatever that thing had been—it was no human agency. She could have sworn that the instant before the light flared up, walls were closing around her as tightly as a tomb's walls; yet they had vanished more lightly than mist in the glow of the fire. But that mouth upon hers, those big, squarely spaced teeth against her lips, the crush of the brutal arm—nothing could have been more tangible.

Yet there had been only the arm, the mouth, the hand. No body. . . . With a sudden shudder that made the gooseflesh ripple along her limbs she remembered that Andred had been dismembered before they flung him into the quicksands. . . . Andred. . . .

She did not know she had said it aloud, but Alaric pounced like a cat on the one word that left her lips.

"Andred? Was it Andred?"

Jirel recovered herself with a real effort. "Andred? He died two hundred years ago!"

"He will never die until——" One of the young boys with the evil faces said that much before Alaric whirled on him angrily.

"Silence! Wait! . . . Lady Jirel, you asked me if the legends of Hellsgarde are true. Now I tell you that the tale of Andred is. We believe he still walks the halls where

his treasure lies hid, and we—we——"

He hesitated, and Jirel saw a strange look of calculation dawn upon his face. He went on smoothly. "We believe there is but one way to find that treasure. Only the ghost of Andred can lead us there. And Andred's ghost has been—elusive, until now."

She could have sworn that he had not meant to say just that when he began to speak. She was surer of it when she saw the little flicker of communication ripple around the circle of faces closing her in. Amusement at a subtle jest in which she did not share . . . it was on every face around her, the hollow-cheeked women's white-rimmed, staring eyes brightened, the men's faces twitched a little with concealed mirth.

She had little need to feign weakness as she turned away from them toward the fire, eager to escape their terrible company even though it meant solitude in this haunted dark. She said, "Let me—rest by the fire. Perhaps it—it—he won't return."

"But he must return!"

She thought that nearly every voice around her spoke simultaneously, and eager agreement was bright upon every face. Even the two dogs had thrust themselves forward among the legs of the little crowd around Jirel, and their shadowed eyes, still faintly aglow as if with borrowed firelight, followed the conversation from face to face as if they too understood. Their gaze turned redly up to Alaric now as he said:

"For many nights we have waited in vain for the force that was Andred to make itself known to us. Not until you come does he create that vortex which—which is necessary if we are to find the treasure." Again, at that word, Jirel thought she felt a little current of amusement ripple from listener to listener.

Alaric went on in his smooth voice, "We are fortunate to find one who has the gift of summoning Andred's spirit to Hellsgarde. I think there must be in you a kindred fierceness which Andred senses and seeks. We must call him out of the dark again—and we must use your power to do it."

Jirel stared around her incredulously. "You would call—*that*—up again?"

Eyes gleamed at her with a glow that was not of the firelight. "We would indeed," murmured the evil-faced boy at her elbow. "And we will not wait much longer."

"But—God's Mercy!" said Jirel, "—are all the legends wrong? They say Andred's spirit swoops down with sudden death on all who trespass in Hellsgarde. Why do you talk as if only I could evoke it? Do you want to die so terribly? I do not! If you kill me for it, I'll have no more of Andred's kisses!"

There was a pulse of silence

around the circle for a moment. Then Alaric said:

"Andred resents only outsiders in Hellsgarde, not his own kinsmen and their retainers. Moreover, those legends you speak of are old ones, telling tales of long-ago trespassers in this castle.

"With the passage of years the spirits of the violent dead draw farther and farther away from their death-scenes. Andred is long dead, and he revisits Hellsgarde Castle less often and less vindictively as the years go by. We have striven a long while to draw him back—but you alone succeeded. No, lady, you must endure Andred's violence once again, or——"

"Or what?" demanded Jirel coldly, dropping her hand to her sword.

Alaric's voice was inflexible. "We are many to your one. We will hold you here until Andred comes again."

Jirel laughed. "You think Joiry's men will let her vanish without a trace? You'll have such a storming about Hellsgarde walls as——"

"I think not, lady. What soldiers will dare follow when a braver one than any of them was vanished in Hellsgarde? No, Joiry, your men will not seek you here. You——"

Jirel's sword flamed in the firelight as she sprang backward, dragging it clear. The blade flashed once —and then arms like iron pinioned her from behind. For a dreadful moment she thought they were Andred's, and her heart turned over.

But Alaric smiled, and she knew. It was the dwarf who had slipped behind her at an unspoken message from his master, and if his back was weak his arms were not. She could not wrench herself free.

Struggling, sobbing curses, kicking hard with her steel-spurred heels, she could not break his hold. There was a murmurous babble all around her of that strange, haunting tongue again, *"L'vraista! Tai g'hasta vrai! El vraist' tai lau!"*

And the two devil-faced boys dived for her ankles. They clung like ghoulishly grinning apes, pinning her feet to the floor. And Alaric stepped forward to wrench the sword from her hand. He murmured something in their queer speech, and the crowd scattered purposefully.

Fighting hard, Jirel was scarcely aware of their intention before it was accomplished. But she heard the sudden splash of water on blazing logs and the tremendous hissing of steam as the fire went out and darkness fell like a blanket upon the shadowy hall.

The crowd had melted away from her into the dark, and now the grip on her ankles suddenly ceased and the great arms that held her so hard heaved in a mighty swing.

Choking with fury, she reeled into the darkness. There was nothing to stop her, and those mighty arms had thrown her hard. She fell and slid helplessly across bare flag-

stones in black dark, her greaves and empty scabbard clanging upon stone. When she came to a halt, bruised and scratched and breathless, it was a moment before she could collect her senses enough to scramble up, too stunned even for curses.

"Stay where you are, Jirel of Joiry," Alaric's voice said calmly out of the blackness. "You cannot escape this hall. Stand still—and wait."

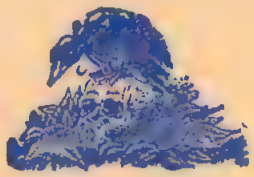
It was a silence full of tense waiting. She could almost feel the anticipation that beat out upon her from the circle of invisible jailers, and at the thought of what they waited her blood ran chilly.

After a while she said in a voice that sounded unexpectedly small in the darkness. "You might throw me a pillow. I'm tired of standing and this floor's cold."

To her surprise footsteps moved softly and quite surely across stone, and after a moment a pillow hurtled out of the darkness to thump softly at her feet. Jirel sank upon it thankfully, only to stiffen an instant later and glare about her in the dark, the hair prickling on her neck. So—they could see in the darkness! There had been too much certainty in those footsteps and the accurate toss of the pillow to doubt it.

The darkness was enormous above her. Age upon age went by, with no sound except her own soft breathing to break that quiet pulsing with waiting and anticipation. Her terror grew. Suppose that dreadful storm-wind should come whooping through the hall again; suppose the bodiless arm should seize her and the mouth come ravening down upon her lips once more. Coldness crept down her spine.

Yes, and suppose it did come



again. What use, for her? These slinking abnormalities who were her jailers would never share the treasure with her which they were so avid to find—so avid that they dared evoke this terror by night and brave a death which legend whispered fearfully of, simply that they might possess it. *It*—did they know, then, what lay in Andred's terribly guarded box? What conceivable thing could be so precious that men would dare *this* to have it?

And what hope at all for her? If the monstrous thing called Andred did not come tonight—then he would come again some other night, sooner or later, and all nights would find her isolated here as bait for the monster that haunted Hellsgarde.

She had boasted without hope

when he said her men would follow. They were brave men and they loved her—but they loved living more. No, there was not a man in Joiry who would dare follow where she had failed. She remembered Guy of Garlot's face. That handsome coward, goading her into this that he might possess the nameless thing he coveted.

Well, she would ruin his comely face for him with the cross-hilt of her sword—if she lived. If she lived! She was forgetting. . . .

Slowly the stars wheeled by the arrow-slit windows high up in the darkness of the walls. Jirel sat hugging her knees and watching them. The darkness sighed above her with vagrant drafts, any one of which might be Andred roaring down out of the night.

Well, her captors had made one mistake. How much it might avail her she did not know, but they thought they had disarmed her, and Jirel hugged her greave-sheathed legs in the darkness and smiled a wicked smile, knowing they had not.

It must have been after midnight, and Jirel dozing uneasily with her head on her knees, when a long sigh from the darkness made her start awake. Alaric's voice, heavy with weariness and disappointment, spoke in his nameless language.

It occurred to Jirel to wonder briefly that though this seemed to be their mother tongue—for they spoke it under stress and among themselves—yet their speech with her had no taint of accent. It was strange—but she was beyond wondering long about the monstrous folk among whom she had fallen.

Footsteps approached her, walking unerringly. Jirel shook herself awake and stood up, stretching cramped limbs. Hands seized her arms from both sides—at the first grasp, with no groping, though even her dark-accustomed eyes could see nothing. No one bothered to translate Alaric's speech to her, but she realized that they had given up their vigil for the night.

She was too drugged with sleep to care. Even her terror had dulled as the endless night hours dragged by. She stumbled along between her captors, making no effort to resist.

No one troubled to strike a light. They went swiftly and unhesitatingly through the blackness, and when stairs rose unexpectedly underfoot Jirel was the only one who stumbled. Up steps, along a cold and echoing hall—and then a sudden thrust that sent her staggering. A stone wall caught her and a door slammed at her back. She whirled, a hot Norman oath smoking on her lips, and knew that she was alone.

Groping, she made out the narrow confines of her prison. There was a cot, a jug of water, a rough door through whose chinks light began to glimmer even as she ran questing hands across its surface. Voices spoke briefly outside, and in

a moment she understood. Alaric had summoned one of his apish men to watch her while he and his people slept. She knew it must be a man-at-arms and not one of Alaric's company, for the fellow had brought a lantern with him. She wondered if the guardsmen knew how unerringly their masters walked the darkness—or if they cared.

Silence fell outside. Jirel smiled a thin smile and leaned into the nearest corner, drawing up one knee. The long, thin-bladed knife she carried between grave and leg slid noiselessly from its sheath. She waited with feline patience, her eyes upon the lighted chinks between the door's planks.

It seemed a long while before the guard ceased his muffled pacing, yawned loudly, tested the bar that fastened the door from without. Jirel's thin smile widened. The man grunted and—she had prayed he would—settled down at last on the floor with his back against the panels of her door.

She knew he meant to sleep awhile in the certainty that the door could not be opened without waking him.

She had caught her own guards at that trick too often not to expect it now.

Still she waited. Presently the even breath of slumber reached her ears, and she licked her lips and murmured, "Gentle Jesu, let him not wear mail!" and leaned to the door. Her knife was thin enough to slide easily between the panels.

He was not wearing mail—and the blade was razor-keen. He must scarcely have felt it, or known when he died. She felt the knife grate against bone and gave it an expert twist to clear the rib it had grazed, and heard the man give a sudden, startled grunt in his sleep, and then a long sigh.

He must never have awakened. Jirel smiled pleasantly and withdrew her knife.

It was simple enough to lift the bar with that narrow blade. The difficulty was in opening the door against the dead weight of the man outside, but she accomplished that too, without too much noise—and then the lantern sat waiting for her and the hall was long and empty in the half-dark. She could see the arch of the stairway and knew the way she had come. And she did not hesitate on the way down.

She had thought it all out carefully in the darkness of the hall downstairs while she crouched on the cushion and waited for Andred's ravenous storm-blast to come shrieking down above her.

There was no way out. She knew that. Other castles had posterns and windows from which a fugitive might escape, but quicksands surrounded Hellsgarde and the only path to freedom lay along the causeway where Alaric's guard would be watching tonight.

And too—she had come here for

a purpose. It was her duty to find that small treasured box which alone would buy the twenty lives depending on her. She would do that, or die. And perhaps, after all, it was fortunate that the castle had not been empty when she came. Without Alaric, it might never have occurred to her to dare the power of Andred's ghost in order to reach her goal.

She realized now that it might well be the only way she would ever succeed. Too many searchers in the past had ransacked Hellsgarde Castle to leave her much hope unless great luck attended her. But Alaric had said it: there was a way—a terrible and deadly perilous way, but the only hope.

And after all, what chance did she have? To sit supinely waiting, a helpless decoy, until the night when Andred's power swooped down to claim her again—or to seek him out deliberately and challenge him to the duel.

The end would be the same—she must suffer his presence again, either way. But tonight there was a bare chance for her to escape with the treasure-casket, or at least to find it alone and if she lived to hide it and bargain with Alaric for freedom.

It was a forlorn and futile hope, she knew well. But it was not in her to sit waiting for death, and this way there was at least a bare hope for success. She gripped her bloody knife in one hand and her lantern in the other and went on down the stairs, cat-footed and quick.

Her little circle of light moving with her across the cold flags was so tenuous a defense against the dark. One gust of Andred's storm-wind would puff it out and the darkness would smash in upon her like a blow. And there were other ghosts here than Andred's—small, cold things in the dark just beyond her lantern light.

She could feel their presence as she picked her way across the great hall, past the quenched logs of the fireplace, past the crumbling ruins of armor and tapestry, toward the one spot where she thought she might be surest of summoning up the dreadful thing she sought.

It was not easy to find. She ranged back and forth for many minutes with her little circle of light before a corner of that great black splotch she hunted moved into the light; beast-shaped, dark as murder itself upon the flagstones Andred's life-blood spilled two hundred years ago.

Here once before that ravening ghost had taken her; here if anywhere, surely he would come again. She had come too far to fail herself now. She drew a deep breath and blew out the lifted lantern.

Darkness crashed upon her with the impact of a physical blow, almost squeezing the breath from her body. And now suddenly fright was past and the familiar winy exultation of tension before battle rushed

along her limbs and she looked up into the darkness defiantly and shouted to the great vaults of the ceiling, "Come out of Hell, dead Andred! Come if you dare, Andred the Damned!"

Wind—wind and storm and violence! It snatched the words from her lips and the breath from her throat in one tremendous whirling gust that came rushing out of nowhere. And in the instant of its coming, while the wild challenge still echoed on her lips, a ravenous mouth came storming down to silence hers and a great arm smacked down around her shoulders in a blow that sent her reeling as iron fingers dug agonizingly into her arm.

She had ducked her head instinctively when she felt the arm seize her, but not soon enough. The heavy mouth had hers, and again the square, wide-set teeth were bruising her lips and the violence of the monstrous kiss made fury bubble up in her sealed throat as she fought in vain against it.

This time the thing was not such a stunning surprise, and she could sense more clearly what was happening to her. As before, the whole violent fury of the attack burst upon her at once—the mouth seized hers and the arm swept her almost off her feet in the same instant, and in that instant the unslacking grip around her shoulders rushed her across the dark floor.

But she could sense dimly again that walls were closing around her, closer and closer, like a tomb's walls. And as before she was aware of a tremendous force beating about her, a greater violence than any one manifestation of it upon her body; for the mouth, the gripping hand, the arm, the sweeping drag itself were all but parts of that vortex.

It was all too dimly sensed a thing to put clearly into words, and yet it was terribly real. Jirel, breathless and bruised and stunned with pain and violence, still knew clearly that here in the midst of the great open hall walls were drawing prison-tight about her.

Savagely she slashed at the arm around her shoulders, at the steel-fingered hand digging her arm to the bone. But the angle was an awkward one and she was too dazed to know if she cut flesh or simply stabbed at disembodied force. And the grip did not slacken; the storming mouth still held hers in a kiss so wild and infuriating that she could have sobbed with pure rage.

Those walls were very near . . . her stumbling knees touched stone. She groped dizzily with her free hand and felt walls dripping-damp, close around her. The forward motion had ceased, and the power which was Andred whirled in one concentrated cone of violence that stopped her breath and sent the darkness reeling around her.

Through the haze of her confu-

sion she knew that this, then, must be his own place to which he had dragged her, a place of stone and damp and darkness somewhere *outside*—for they had reached it too quickly for it to be a real place—and yet it was tangible.

Stone walls cold against her hands, and what were these round and slipping things underfoot?—things that rattled a little as she stumbled among them—bones? Dear God, the bones of other seekers after treasure, who had found what they sought? For she thought the treasure-box must be here, surely, if it were anywhere at all.

Her senses were failing and the whirl that was like the whirl in a tornado's heart seemed to create a vacuum which drew her out of her body in one thin, protesting wisp of self that had no strength to fight.

Somewhere a long way off was her body, hanging limp in the clutch of the iron arm, gasping for breath under a kiss that made reality faint about her, still struggling feebly in some tomb-smelling, narrow place where stone walls dripped and bones turned underfoot—the bones of those who had come before her.

But she was not there. She was a wispy wraith rooted only tenuously in that fainting body, a wraith that reeled out and out in a thin skein to spin on the whirls of tornado-violence pulling her farther and farther and farther away.

The darkness was slipping sidewise—the stone walls were a prison no longer, for she was moving up along the great expanding whirl that sucked her out of her body, up and out around widening circles into night-time distances where space and time were not.

Somewhere infinitely far away a foot that was not hers stumbled over something small and square, and a body that was not hers slid to its knees among wet, rattling bones, and a bosom that was not hers bruised itself on the corner of that square something as the tenantless body fell forward among bones upon a wet stone floor.

But upon the widening whorls of the vortex the wisp that was Jirel rebelled in its spinning. She must go back somehow—she must remember—there was something—something. . . .

For one fleeting instant she was in her body again, crumpled down upon the stones, arms sprawled about a small square thing that was slimy to the touch. A box—a wet leather box thick with fungus, bound with iron. Andred's box, that for two hundred years searchers had hunted in vain.

The box that Andred had died for and that she would die for too—was dying for now in the darkness and the damp among the bones, with violence ravening down to seize her again.

Dimly, as her senses left her for the second time, she heard a dog bark, high and hysterically, from far above. And another dog an-

swered, and then she heard a man's voice shouting in a tongue she did not know, a wild, exultant shout, choking with triumph. But after that the dizziness of the whirlwind which snatched her out of her body made everything blur, until—

Queerly, it was music that brought her back. A lute's strings singing as if madness itself swept wild chords across them. The dwarfed jester's lute, shrieking with music that wakened her out of nowhere into her own fallen body in the dampness and the dark where that hard box-corner bruised her bosom.

And the whirlwind was—uncoiling—from about her. The walls widened until she was no longer aware of their prison closeness and the smell of damp and decay faded from her nostrils. In a dizzy flash of realization she clasped the wet casket to her breast just as the walls faded altogether and she sat up unsteadily, blinking into the dark.

The whirlwind still raved around her, but somehow, strangely, it did not touch her now. No, there was something outside it—some strong force against which it battled—a force that—that—

She was in the dark hall again. Somehow she knew it. And the wild lute-music shrilled and sang, and in some queer way—she saw. It was dark still—but she saw. For a luminous glow was generating itself in a ring around her and by its ghostlight she was aware—scarcely through sight—of familiar faces spinning past her in a wide, whirling ring.

A witch dance, round and round. Alaric's lined face flashed by, blazing with exultation; Damara's white-ringed eyes glared blindly into the dark. She saw the two boys whirl past, the light of hell itself luminous on their faces. There was a wild bark, and one of the greyhounds loped by her and away, firelight from no earthly flame glaring in its eyes.

Round and round her through that luminous glow which was scarcely light the mad circle spun. And ever the lute-strings wailed and sang with a wilder music than strings can ever have sung before, and the terrible joy on every face—yes, even upon the dogs'—was more frightening than even Andred's menace had been.

Andred—Andred. . . . The power of his volcano-force spun above her now, with a strength that stirred the red hair against her cheeks as she knelt there, hugging the slimy box. Jirel of Joiry thought the very air sang with tension and stress.

That circle was reeling counterwise to the spin of Andred's vortexing force, and Andred was weakening. She could feel him slackening above her in the dark. The music shrieked louder above the failing storm-wind and the fearful joy upon those faces whirling past told her why.

Somehow they were overpowering him. Something in the dwarf's mad lute-strings, something in the spinning of their dance was breaking down the strength of Andred's centuries-old violence. She could feel it weakening as she crouched there with the casket hugged bruisingly to her bosom.

And yet—was it this precious casket that they fought for? No one had a glance to spare for the crouching girl or the burden she hugged. Every face was lifted raptly, every eye stared blindly and exultantly into the upper dark as if the thing that was Andred were visible and—and infinitely desirable.

It was a lust for that thing upon their faces that made joy so vivid there. Jirel's brain had almost ceased recording sensation in the bewilderment of what she watched.

When the dance ended she scarcely knew it. Lulled into a dizzy trance by the mad spinning of the dancers, she was almost nodding on her knees in their center, feeling her brain whirl with their whirling—feeling the motion slow about her so imperceptibly that nothing but the whirl itself registered on her mind.

But the dancers were slackening —and with them, the whirl above. The wind no longer raved through the dark; it was a slow sigh now, growing softer and gentler as the circle of dancers ceased to spin.

And then there was a great, soft, puffing sigh from the darkness above her that blew out her awareness like a candle-flame.

DAYLIGHT FINGERING through the arrow-slits touched Jirel's closed lids. She awoke painfully, blinking in the light. Every muscle and bone of her supple body ached from the buffeting of last night's violence, and the cold stones were hard beneath her. She sat up, groping by instinct for her knife. It lay a little distance off, rusting with last night's blood. And the casket—the casket!

Panic swelling in her throat quieted in an instant as she saw that precious, molding thing lying on its side at her elbow. A little thing, its iron hinges rusty, its leather whitened and eaten with rot from two centuries in a nameless, dripping place; but safe, unopened.

She picked it up, shaking it experimentally. And she heard the softest shifting within, a sound and weight like finest flour moving gently.

A rustle and a sigh from beyond brought her head up, and she stared around her in the shadows of the hall. In a broad, uneven circle the bodies of last night's dancers lay sprawled. Dead? No, slow breathing stirred them as they lay, and upon the face of the nearest—it was Damara—was a look of such glutted satiety that Jirel glanced away in disgust.

But they all shared it. She had

seen revelers asleep after a night of drunken feasting with not half such surfeit, such almost obscene satisfaction upon their faces as Alaric's drugged company wore now. She wondered what nameless satiety they had achieved in the dark after her own consciousness went out.

A footfall sounded upon stone behind her and she spun half-way round, rising on one knee and shifting the knife-hilt firmer in her fist. It was Alaric, a little unsteady on his feet, looking down upon her with a sort of half-seeing abstraction. His scarlet tunic was dusty and rumpled as if he had slept in it all night upon the floor.

He ran a hand through his ruffled hair and yawned, and looked down at her with a visible effort at focusing his attention.

"I'll have your horse brought up," he said, his eyes sliding indifferently away from her even as he spoke. "You may go now."

Jirel gaped up at him, her lips parting in amazement over white teeth. He was not watching her. His eyes had shifted focus and he was staring blindly into some delightful memory that had blotted out Jirel's very existence. And upon his face that look of almost obscene satiety relaxed every feature until even his sword-gash mouth hung loose.

"B-but—" Jirel blinked and clutched at the mildewed box she had risked her life for. He came back into focus for an impatient instant to say carelessly:

"Oh—that! Take the silly thing."

"You—you know what it is? I thought you wanted—"

He shrugged. "I could not have explained to you last night what it was I wanted of Andred. So I said it was the treasure we sought—you could understand that. But as for that rotting little box—I don't know or care what lies inside. I've had—a better thing."

And his remembering eyes shifted again to escape hers and stare blissfully into the past.

"Then w-why did you—save me?"

"Save you?" He laughed. "We had no thought of you or your treasure in what we—did—last night. You have served your purpose—you may go free."

"Served—what purpose?"

Impatiently for an instant he brought himself wholly back out of his remembering dream to say:

"You did what we were holding you for—called up Andred into our power. Lucky for you that the dogs sensed what happened after you had slipped off to dare the ghost alone. And lucky for us, too. I think Andred might not have come even to take you, had he sensed our presence. Make no doubt of it—he feared us, and with good reason."

Jirel looked up at him for a long instant, a little chill creeping down her spine, before she said in a shaken whisper:

"What—are you?" For a mo-

ment she almost hoped he would not answer. But he smiled, and the look of deformity deepened upon his face.

"A hunter of undeath," he said softly. "A drinker of undeath, when I can find it. My people and I lust after that dark force which the ghosts of the violent dead engender, and we travel far sometimes between—feastings."

His eyes escaped hers for an instant to stare into the past. He murmured, "I wonder if any man who has not tasted it could guess the ecstasy of drinking up the undeath of a strong ghost . . . a ghost as strong as Andred's . . . feeling that black power pouring into you in deep drafts as you suck it down —a thirst that strengthens as you drink—feel—darkness—spreading through every vein more sweetly than wine, more intoxicating. . . . To be drunk on undeath—a joy almost unbearable."

Jirel scrambled to her feet, cradling the leather box in her arm, averting her eyes from his.

"Let me go, then," she said in a lowered voice, obscurely embarrassed as if she had looked inadvertently upon something indescribable.

Alaric glanced up at her and smiled. "You are free to go," he said, "but waste no time returning with your men for vengeance against the force we imposed on you." His smile deepened at her little twitch of acknowledgment, for that thought had been in her mind.

"Nothing holds us now at Hellsgarde. We will leave today on—another search. One thing before you go—we owe you a debt for luring Andred into our power, for I think he would not have come without you. Take a warning away with you, lady."

"What is it?" Jirel's gaze flicked the man's briefly and fell again. She would not look into his eyes if she could help it.

"Do not open that box you carry."

And before she could get her breath to speak he had smiled at her and turned away, whistling for his men. Around her on the floor Jirel heard a rustling and a sigh as the sleepers began to stir.

She stood quiet for an instant longer, staring down in bewilderment at the small box under her arm, before she turned to follow Alaric into the outer air.

Last night was a memory and a nightmare to forget. Not even the dead men still on their ghastly guard before the door could mar her triumph now.

Jirel rode back across the causeway in the strong light of morning, moving like a rider in a mirage between blue skies and blue reflecting waters. Behind her Hellsgarde Castle was a vision swimming among the mirroring pools of the marsh. And as she rode, she remembered.

The vortex of violence out of

which she had snatched this box last night—the power and terror of the thing that had treasured it so long . . . what lay within? Something akin to—Andred? Alaric might not know, but he had guessed. His warning still sounded in her ears.

She rode awhile with bent brows, but presently a wicked little smile began to thin the red lips of Joiry's sovereign lady. Well . . . she had suffered much for Guy of Garlot, but she thought now that she would not smash in his handsome, grinning face with her sword-hilt as she had dreamed so luxuriously of doing.

No . . . she would have a better vengeance.

She would hand him a little iron-bound leather box.

COMING

Another DEPARTMENT OF LOST STORIES Masterpiece

THE NIGHT

by RAY BRADBURY

Next month in our memorable, famous parade of "Lost Stories" we'll give you one of the acclaimed greats in the strange world of fantasy—Ray Bradbury. The story is "The Night" and the terrible, somber suspense of learning that night is far more than darkness is felt throughout the telling of this unusual tale. In it an eight year old boy experiences a night when reason ended and universal evil took over. You'll witness a summer night brimmed deep in time and stars, and you'll feel the ineffable love of a boy for his older brother.

HAPPY HOUR HOLDUP

by JACK FORREST HARRY

Behind me a dead man sprawled in his blood: ahead the road blocks were waiting. I grinned. I had a deadly weapon—the chic little babe beside me.

THE NEON SIGN said *Happy Hour Night Club*.

As a club, night or otherwise, it was a crock. There were only two people in the whole joint when I squeezed through the door, including the bartender himself, and he was old enough to be my grandfather's papa.

The other was a chick, young, a looker, one I'd go for if I had time.

I didn't.

"Don't move!" I snapped, levelling my rod in warning. They both froze near the cash register. "Take your hand outa that bag, babe, and both of you get your mitts up where I can watch 'em."

They didn't argue.

I relaxed. It was going to be easier than I'd expected, even though it didn't look like I'd make much haul from the place. Breaking out of prison at one in the morning posed problems, among them find-

ing somebody to change clothes with at that hour and some place to knock over for a stake.

I'd mugged a guy about my size and stripped him, but he'd only had three singles in his wallet. Not enough to carry me far. I needed loot, a lot of loot, so I had to take a chance on something big enough. The *Happy Hour* was the only joint I'd found open in the whole hick town.

I hoped the old guy and doll with him wouldn't see through my dummy gun. They shouldn't, not when guards at the lockup ten miles away had fallen flat for it.

"Hey, babe, that your heap outside, the one with the motor running?" I'd seen two cars in the lot, one wasting gas and carrying out of state plates.

She nodded.

"Good. You'll be giving me a lift then." I grinned.

"I don't think—"

"Don't think!" I chopped her off, my grin changing to a glower, and she knew better than to go on, although she frowned thoughtfully. "That goes for you too." I waved my phony rod at the barkeep, who looked so scared he might croak from a heart attack any time.

At least the girl didn't seem shook. Wary, yes, but not scared a bit. I had to give her credit for guts. Might even give her credit for something else later, I mused, keeping her sleek, bouffant self swimming in view.

Her tumbled hair was raw blue-black silk. Her eyes were deep set, intelligent but kind of wild. She had a gypsy look about her, a liveliness not to be denied, not even by danger. I found myself losing track of what I'd come to do because of her.

With effort, I yanked myself out of the day dream.

"Clean out the cash register and anything else you got," I said to the bartender. "Pass it over here careful-like. No tricks. I'd as soon cut you down as look at you."

"Yes, sir." He turned, shaking, and began emptying the cash register into a paper bag which he took from under the counter.

"You're the escaped convict, aren't you?"

"Huh?" I looked directly at her.

"You're the man who escaped from the county jail this morning just before you were to be transfered to the state prison to begin serving your sentence. Am I right?"

"Yeah. How'd you guess?"

"It was on the news in my car radio. I don't think you'll get far. They've put up road blocks all around here."

"Thanks for the info. I'll keep it in mind."

She shrugged. "You probably knew already."

"I ain't dumb enough to think they'd forgot all about me." I laughed. "And I'll tell you somethin' else too. I'll get by 'em. Know how I'm gonna do it?"

"I can guess. You expect me to

drive you. But how do you know I'll do it?"

"Oh, you'll do it. You'll do it or you'll be dead," I growled, trying to frighten her.

But it didn't shake her at all.

"I see," was all she said.

I turned to the bartender. "Hurry it up, gramps. I ain't got all night."

He didn't say anything. He finished and passed the bag across the counter to me. It seemed pretty light.

"This all you got? You sure?" I waved the bag at him.

He nodded, looking scared.

"It's all he's got," the girl said. "How much do you expect him to have in a little town like this?"

I looked at her. She was right. But that wasn't what drew my attention. She didn't belong in this town. Her hairdo was too smart for the country. So was her slinky sheath dress. Despite the untamed look in her eyes, her sophistication spelled big city. I meant to go to the city. She would know the way.

"Okay," I said. "That's it then. You, gramps, over there." I pointed to the end of the bar where I headed myself. When we reached it, he lunged for me. I rapped him on the side of his head with my phony rod. He went down like a stone.

I checked his pulse. It had stopped!

For a minute my head buzzed. I hadn't wanted murder on my hands with everything else. Now I had it.

I turned back to the girl. I'd heard her gasp slightly when I clubbed the old guy, but that was all. She was a cool one, cooler than me.

But I couldn't let her know that.

"You see I ain't kiddin'," I growled. "He's dead. Least he can't turn in an alarm. You'll get the same if you don't play along."

She shrugged. "You're holding the gun. I've little choice."

"Just so's you remember it. Let's hit the heap now," I pointed my rod at the exit as I grabbed a bottle of whiskey from behind the bar to take along.

She didn't argue. She went out in front of me. At the car, she paused.

"You drive," I said, climbing into the back seat. "That way I can keep an eye on you."

She nodded and got in behind the wheel. In less time than it takes to pull a trigger, we'd blasted off and were rolling up the highway.

"Hey! Slow down!" I shouted. "You think I want to get picked up for speedin'?"

"It would be less charge than for what you're wanted now."

"Lay off the cracks or you're dead," I said savagely. But I didn't mean it. I hadn't wanted to kill the old guy. I hadn't wanted to kill anybody. But I'd always known I would if I had to—my kind of life meant no holds barred, no stops.

If I hadn't been picked up, tried and convicted on that bank caper, I might already have knocked over somebody else. The old geezer's death was an accident, but it did prove what I'd known all along, that I was capable of killing.

A little later I felt better and asked, "Which way you heading?"

"East, I believe."

"Good. Just the way I want! Into the city. You know the way. Let's get there."

"I told you, there are road blocks. It's impossible."

I thought about that for a minute. She did have a point. Even if she were willing to help me, the car would be searched at the first road block and I'd be spotted immediately. Which left me only one choice. Not a bad one at that, I grinned, staring at her in the darkness.

I'd have to hole up somewhere But not alone. Oh no, not alone. The cops were looking for an escaped convict, not a young honeymooning couple from out of state. It was a perfect cover. And there were extras, maybe. I nodded. Those months in jail had been lonely.

The first motel we approached had a vacancy sign, so I pushed my rod into her back.

"Turn in here," I ordered.

She smiled, oddly, but she did as she was told.

"Don't get no funny ideas. Play along and don't try to warn nobody,

or I'll shoot you and them too. You're my wife from now on. Get me?"

"I get you," she replied, but she still didn't sound the least bit frightened.

The clerk eyed us suspiciously while I signed the register. He brightened when I paid him in advance from the money I'd taken in the *Happy Hour,* which had turned out to be more than I'd expected, more than two hundred dollars. The old guy must have kept a whole week's receipts stashed in the joint.

"Just leave your key in your room when you go in the morning, Mr. Hudson," the clerk said as we left the office.

"All right. We will."

Our room was way down at the end. There were only a few cars on the parking area; the place was practically deserted. So much the better, I figured, just in case my little wife decided on any funny stuff and I had to make some noise.

After the lock clicked on our unit, sealing us off from the outside, I relaxed. Everything had gone so easy, I felt like a little bragging.

"Worked just dandy!" I said,

tossing my phony rod on a chair and twisting the cap off the bottle of whiskey.

Her eyes went to the gun.

"Don't get no ideas." I laughed. "That's part of it. You won't get nowhere if you try grabbin' it."

"Part of it? What do you mean?"

I chuckled some more. "Mean just what I said, babe. That's a phony. It worked like a charm, but now I don't need it no more, because when I'm finished with you I'm gonna tie you up anyway. And if you scream, I'll just choke you with my bare hands. Get it?"

Strangely, she smiled. "You mean you haven't even got a real gun?"

"Nope." I was proud of myself. I took a long drag on the bottle, then blew out air. "Look what I've managed to pull off with nothin' but a hunk of iron and guts," I added when the whiskey stopped burning my throat enough so that I could speak again.

She laughed. I was surprised. I'd expected her to be disgusted with herself for being as fooled as everybody else. But she didn't appear disgusted at all.

"Well, that's fine, that makes everything very much easier," she said. "I don't need to wait until you're not looking, now, do I?"

"Wait? Wait for what?" I muttered, starting toward her as I saw her hand go into her purse.

But I'd started far too late. A neat little .22 Minx Berratta suddenly came out of the purse and ended up pointed right at me.

"Hold it right there," she said.

I did.

"That's fine," she continued. "Don't do anything foolish and you won't get hurt. I have nothing particularly against you, so if you'll just empty your pockets of that money and push it over the bed to me, I'll say good-by to you and let you go on and play your own game with the police."

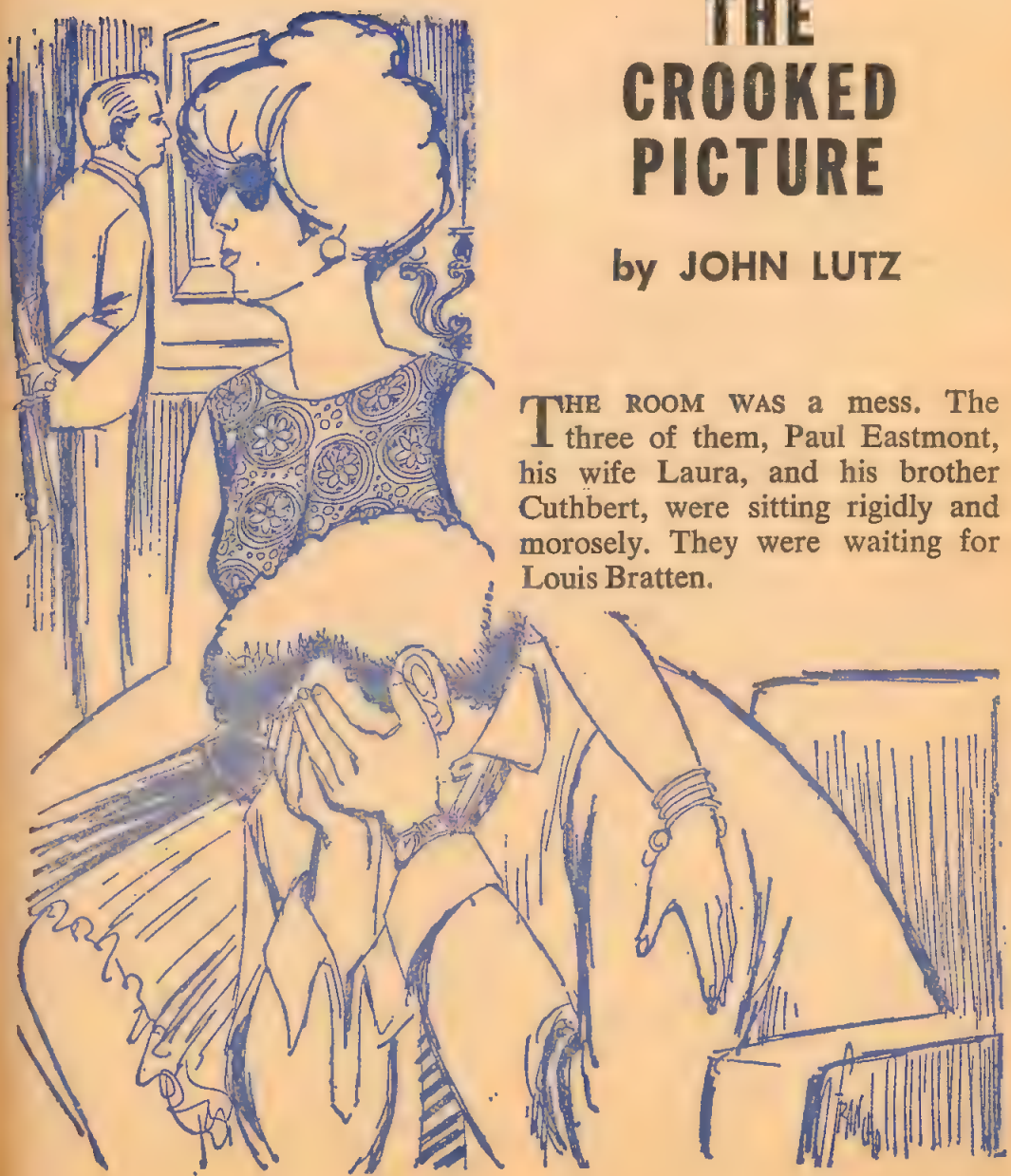
"The money! You want the money, and you're not going to turn me in!"

"Of course I want the money. Why do you think I drove all the way out here at this hour? And no, I won't turn you in. You're nothing to me, except that you barged in when I was about to rob that poor old man you killed. But that's a rap that'll be hung on you and you alone, and I'll have what I came for anyway.

"Now, let's not waste any more time. The money, quickly, or I'll put little holes all through you. The police will no doubt find you easily enough by morning, since you're losing me, your cover, but I don't think they'll particularly want to find you like swiss cheese."

They did, too, find me by morning. And they just laughed when I told them about the aftermath of the *Happy Hour* holdup—laughed as if they'd never heard anything so funny, and didn't believe one word I said.

Where do you go . . . what can you do, when you're preyed on by a man who is dead?



THE CROOKED PICTURE

by JOHN LUTZ

THE ROOM WAS a mess. The three of them, Paul Eastmont, his wife Laura, and his brother Cuthbert, were sitting rigidly and morosely. They were waiting for Louis Bratten.

"But just who is this Bratten?" Laura Eastmont asked in a shaking voice. She was a very beautiful woman, on the edge of middle age.

"He's a repulsive, insulting ne'-er-do-well," Cuthbert, recently of Harvard, said. "A drunken, insolent sot."

"And he's a genius," Paul Eastmont added, "in his own peculiar way. More importantly, he's my friend." He placed a hand on his wife's wrist. "Bratten is the most discreet man I know."

Laura shivered. "I hope so, Paul."

Cuthbert rolled his king size cigarette between thumb and forefinger, an annoyed look on his young, aqualine face. "I don't see why you put such stock in the man, Paul. He's run the gamut of alcoholic degeneration. From chief of homocide to—what? If I remember correctly, you told me some time ago that they'd taken away his private investigator's license."

He saw that he was upsetting his sister-in-law even more and shrugged his thin shoulders. "My point is that he's hardly the sort of man to be confided in concerning *this.*" He looked thoughtful. "On the other hand, half of what he says is known to be untrue anyway."

The butler knocked lightly, pushed one of the den's double doors open, and Louie Bratten entered. He was a blocky, paunchy little man of about forty, with a perpetual squint in one eye. His coarse dark hair was mussed, his suit was rumpled and his unclasped tie hung crookedly outside one lapel. He looked as if he'd just stepped out of a hurricane.

"Bratten!" Paul Eastmont said in warm greeting. "You don't know how glad I am to have you in on this!"

Cuthbert nodded coldly. "Mr. Bratten."

Laura stared intently at her hands, which were folded in her lap.

"Give me a drink," Bratten said.

Paul crossed to the portable bar and poured him a straight Scotch, no ice.

Bratten sipped the Scotch, smacked his lips in satisfaction, and then slouched in the most comfortable leather armchair in the den.

"Now, what's bugging you, Paul?" he asked.

Cuthbert stood and leaned on the mantle. "It's hardly a matter to be taken lightly," he said coldly.

"How in the hell can I take it lightly," Bratten asked, "when I don't even know what the matter is?"

Paul raised a hand for silence. "Let me explain briefly. Several years ago, before Laura and I had met, a picture was taken of her in a very—uncompromising pose. This photo fell into the hands of a blackmailer named Hays, who has been milking us for two hundred dollars a month for the past four

years. Recently Hays needed some cash badly. He offered to give me the photo for five thousand dollars."

Paul Eastmont glanced protectively at his embarrassed wife. "Naturally I agreed, and the deal was made. The negative, incidentally, was destroyed long ago, and I happen to know that the photo wasn't reproduced at any time since by taking a picture of it. That was part of the original blackmail arrangement. It's the only picture in existence, an eight by ten glossy."

"Interesting," Bratten said.

"But Hays turned out to be a stubborn sort," Paul went on. "He gave me the photograph yesterday, and like a fool I didn't destroy it. He saw me put it in my wall safe. Last night he broke in here and tried to steal it back."

"And did he?"

"We don't know. Clark, the butler, sleeps in that part of the house, and he heard Hays tinkering about. He surprised him at the open safe and chased him into this room. Hays locked the door behind him as he ran in here, and then found it was a long drop out the window onto hard cement."

"Terrific Scotch," Bratten said. "Did he have the photo?"

"Yes. It wasn't in the wall safe. As you can see, he hurriedly rummaged about in this room, lifting cushions, knocking over the lamp, we think looking for a place to hide

the photo. Then he leaped out the window."

"Caught?"

"Hurt himself when he landed and couldn't run fast enough. Shot dead by the police just outside the gate. And he didn't have the photo on his body, nor was it on the grounds."

"Hays was a smart blackmailer," Bratten said. He squinted at Paul. "You left the room as it was?"

Paul nodded. "I know your peculiar way of working. But the photo must be in this room. We looked everywhere, but we didn't disturb anything, put everything back exactly the way we found it."

"Ah, that's good," Bratten said, either of the Scotch or of the Eastmont's actions. "Another drink, if you please." He handed the empty glass up to Cutherbert, who was the only one standing.

"Really," Cuthbert said, grabbing the glass. "If I had my way we wouldn't have confided this to you."

"We never did hit it off, did we?" Bratten laughed. "That's probably

because you have too much education. Ruins a man sometimes. Restricts his thinking."

Cuthbert reluctantly gave Bratten his fresh drink. "You should be an expert on ruination."

"Touch. That means touche in English." Bratten leaned back and ran his tongue over his lips. "This puts me in mind of another case. One about ten years ago. There was this locked room type murder—"

"What on earth does a locked room murder have to do with this case?" Cuthbert interrupted in agitation.

"Everything, you over-educated idiot. Everything."

Paul motioned for Cuthbert to be silent, and Bratten continued.

"Like they say," Bratten said, "there's a parallel here." He took a sip of Scotch and nonchalantly hung one leg over an arm of his chair. "There were these four brothers, rich, well bred—like Cuthbert here, only with savvy. They'd made their pile on some cheap real estate development out west. The point is, the business was set up so one of the brothers controlled most of the money, and they didn't get along too well to start off with."

He raised his glass and made a mock bow to Cuthbert. "In language you'd understand, it was a classic sibling rivalry intensified by economic inequality. What it all meant was that if this one brother was dead, the other three would profit a hell of a lot. And lo and behold, this one brother did somehow get dead. That's when I was called into the case by a friend of mine, a local sheriff in Illinois.

"Seems one of the brothers had bought a big old house up in a remote wooded area, and six months later the four of them met up there for a business conference or something. The three surviving brothers' story was simply that their brother had gone into this room, locked the door, and never came out. Naturally not, lying in the midde of the floor with a knife in his chest."

"I fail to see any parallel whatever so far," Cuthbert said.

"Patience, punk. The thing of it was, this room was locked from the inside with a sliding bolt and a key still in the keyhole. The one window that opened was locked and there wasn't a mark on the sill. It was summer, and the ground was hard, but I don't think we would have found anything outside anyway."

"Secret panel, no doubt," Cuthbert said.

"Nope. It did happen to be a paneled room, though. We went over that room from wall to wall, ceiling to floor. There was no way out but the door or the window. And to make the thing really confusing, the knife was wiped clean of prints, and there was nothing nearby the dying man could have

used to do that, even if he'd been crazy enough to want to for some reason. There was no sign of a struggle, or of any blood other than what had soaked into the rug around the body.

"Without question the corpse was lying where it fell. On the seat of a chair was an open book, and on an end table was a half empty cup of coffee with the dead man's prints on it. But there was one other thing in the room that caught my attention."

"Well, get it over with and get to the business at hand," Cuthbert said, trying to conceal his interest. "Who was it and how was it done?"

"Another drink," Bratten said, handing up his glass. "Now here was the situation: Dead man in a locked room, three suspects with good motives who were in the same house at the time of the murder, and a knife without prints. The coroner's inquest could come to no conclusion but suicide unless the way the murderer left the room was explained. Without that explanation, no jury could convict."

Bratten paused to take a long pull of Scotch. "The authorities thought they were licked, and my sheriff friend and I were walking around the outside of the house, talking about how hopeless things were, when I found it."

"The solution?" Cuthbert asked.

"No. A nail. And a shiny one."

"Good Lord," Cuthbert said.

"You ignoramus," Bratten sneered. "Doesn't that suggest something to you?"

"It suggests somebody dropped a nail," Cuthbert said furiously.

"Well, I tied that in with what had caught my attention inside the room," Bratten said, "and like they say, everything fell into place. We contacted the former owners of the house, who were in Europe, snooped around a bit, and that was that. We got a confession right away."

Cuthbert was incredulous. "Because of a nail?"

"Not entirely," Bratten said. "How about another drink, while you're up?"

"You'll drown!" Cuthbert cried. He turned to Paul. "How do you expect this sot to help us if he's dead drunk?"

"Give him another," Paul said, "and let him finish."

His face livid, Cuthbert poured Bratten another glass of Scotch. "Out with it," he said impatiently as he gave Bratten the glass. "What was it you saw in the room that you connected with the nail you found?"

"A picture," Bratten said. "It was hanging real crooked, though everything else in the room was in order. It's things like that that bring first daylight to a case." He looked at Cuthbert as if he were observing some kind of odd animal life. "You still don't get it?"

"No," Cuthbert said, controlling himself. "And as I first suspect-

ed, there is no parallel whatsoever with our problem."

Bratten shrugged. "What the brothers did was this: Through their business, they gathered the materials secretly over a period of time and got things ready. When the time was right, they got their victim to go out there with them and stabbed him on the spot, then wiped the knife handle clean. They had the concrete block foundation, the floor, the roof, and all but one of the walls up. They built in an L of the big house so there were only two walls to bother with. They even had the rug and furniture down and ready.

"After the victim was dead, they quickly put up the last wall, already paneled like the rest on the inside and shingled with matching shingles on the outside, and called the police. In short, the locked room was prefabricated and built around the body."

Cuthbert's mouth was open. "Unbelievable!"

"Not really," Bratten said." No one would think to check and see how many rooms the house had, and they did a real good job on the one they built. Of course on close examination you could tell. The heating duct was a dummy, and the half of the molding that fitted against the last wall had dummy nail heads in it.

"But from the outside the room was perfect. The shingles matched and the metal corner flashing was a worn piece taken from another part of the house. The trouble was they didn't think to use old nails, and they didn't want to leave the inside of that last wall bare when they fit it in place."

"An amusing story, I admit," Cuthbert said. "True or not. Now if you'll be so kind as to point out this damned parallel you keep talking about . . ."

Bratten looked surprised. "Why, the picture, you imbecile! The crooked picture on the last wall!" He pointed to a cheap oil painting that hung on the Eastmont's wall.

"But that picture is straight!" Cuthbert yelled in frustration. "It is immaculately straight!"

"Exactly, you learned jackass! It's the only thing in this fouled-up room besides my drink that is immaculately straight. And I suspect if you look between the painting and the cardboard backing, you'll find your photograph."

They did.

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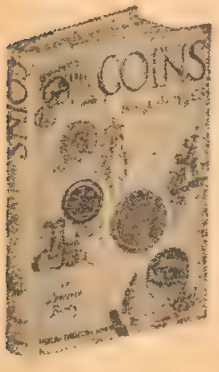

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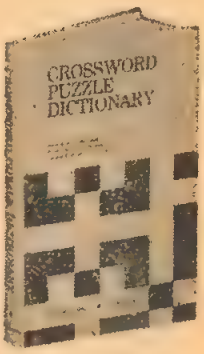

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THE THIN DIME

by ROBERT JAMES GRUBER

Crime is a private eye's business and Murder a messy sideline. I thought I'd seen everything—until a killer came into my office saying a guy had stolen his piggy bank!

LOS ANGELES is a ten o'clock town. Except for the Sunset Strip, where the hippies and the gay ones prance and parade until twelve or one o'clock, the rest of the vast, sprawled-out city is as dead as the forty-four-hour work week.

Late, late, when even the roving tomcats had turned in for their nocturnal rest, a car came barreling along La Brea. It hurtled through the red lights of Melrose, Oakwood, then approached Beverly Boulevard at better than sixty.

At the last possible moment, the brakes were applied and the car screeched around the corner, burning rubber off the tires prodigiously.

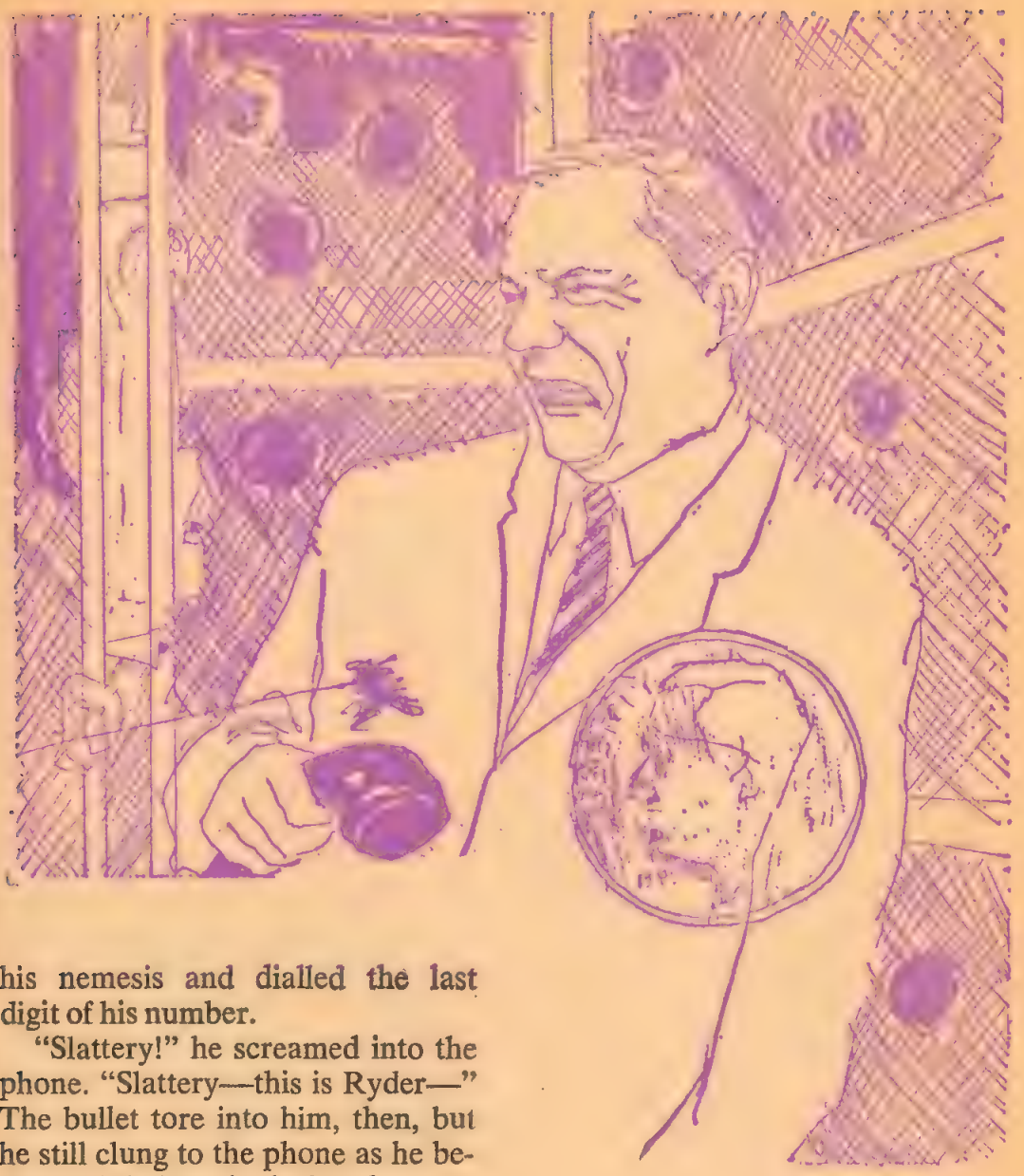
The driver of the car fought the wheel at the same time that he gunned the motor. But before the car had roared two blocks up Beverly, lights appeared behind it and the driver of the first car went into Phase One.

He braked, jerked the wheel and screeched into a deserted filling station area. He brought the car to a halt, two feet from the door of a telephone booth. He scrambled out of the car, hurtled into the booth, jerking the door shut behind him.

Change was already in his hand, but he fumbled it and some of it dropped to the floor. Bright lights flooded the filling station area and the man in the phone booth cried out in anguish.

He slammed a dime into the coin slot and began dialling frantically. He had not completed it, when the killer piled out of his car and rushed toward the phone booth.

The man inside the booth saw



his nemesis and dialled the last digit of his number.

"Slattery!" he screamed into the phone. "Slattery—this is Ryder—" The bullet tore into him, then, but he still clung to the phone as he began to sink down in the booth.

He cried out once more, "Slattery—" and then the second bullet silenced him forever.

The killer tried to get at his victim, but the collapsing of the man inside the booth now frustrated the man outside. The phone booth door opened inward. If the man inside had been standing, the door could have been forced open. Seated, there just wasn't room enough.

The killer put his weight against the door, but it was no use. He was still trying when the wailing of a police car siren stopped him abruptly.

He rushed back to his car, piled in and roared out of the filling station area. When the car hit the street, the police car was only a block away.

The police car elected to go into the filling station instead of pursuing the fleeing car.

It was four minutes after three and the phone rang and rang in Slattery's bedroom. He tried ignoring it, but the ringing would not stop. He finally took the phone from the stand beside the bed.

"Hello," he said, then again, "Hello."

There was no reply and Slattery snarled balefully into the phone, "If this is a wrong number—"

A harsh voice said abruptly, "Who is this?"

"It ain't the King of Spain," retorted Slattery. "Not at this time of night."

"Slattery!" cried the voice on the phone. "I'd recognize that whiskey baritone of yours anywhere. I'll be over in ten minutes."

"Oh, no!" groaned Slattery.

"Oh, *yes!*" snapped the voice on the phone.

The line went dead.

THE DOOR BUZZER whirred and whirred and after awhile Slattery opened the door. Sergeant Blocker stormed in. He was a big man and he had been before the police board a couple of times on charges of police brutality, which was the reason he was still a sergeant.

Now, at three-fifteen in the morning, he was grinning from ear to ear. He did not like Slattery and Slattery reciprocated, in spades.

"I'm sure you've got a nice bedtime story to tell me," he chortled, "so go ahead—tell!"

"What the hell are you talking about?" snapped Slattery. "You call me up at three o'clock in the morning—"

"Ah, this one's going to be a doozy," Blocker interrupted. "I can see that already, but just go back a little, will you? I didn't call you, Slattery. Uh-uh!"

"All right, I didn't call you—you didn't call me. Shall we throw that around awhile?"

"Ryder called you," said Blocker. "R-y-d-e-r, John F."

Slattery looked at Blocker and the police sergeant's face lost its good humor. "All right, Slattery, it's homicide, so save me the lecture on what a private eye can and can't be made to do. You talk."

"Ryder's the homicide?"

Blocker nodded. "Right in the phone booth, while he was talking to you."

"He wasn't talking to me," Slattery said grimly. He made a slight gesture as Blocker started to protest. "I didn't answer the phone right away. I don't like calls in the middle of the night. But it wouldn't stop ringing and when I finally did answer it was you on the phone."

The belligerent look grew on Blocker's heavy features. "I

warned you, Slattery, it's homicide. You cooperate, or I make another try for your license."

"I'm cooperating," Frank Slattery snapped. "I didn't know Ryder from Adam when he came here at five-thirty yesterday afternoon and if things hadn't been so damn slow and I needed the money, I'd have kicked him out. But I took his fifty bucks—"

"Fifty? Isn't that a pretty small retainer for you?"

"It's lousy, especially since I was only to get another hundred when I finished the job. Which I knew damn well I wouldn't, when I took the fifty. But the guy insisted—"

"What was the job?"

Slattery inhaled deeply and let it out with a "whoosh." "You won't believe it when I tell you."

"Try me."

"All right. Hang on. Somebody stole Ryder's piggy bank and he wanted me to find it for him."

"Keep clowning," said Blocker, through his teeth. "Keep it up and we finish this at the station, with Lieutenant Cross sitting in."

"I told you you wouldn't believe it," said Slattery. "All right, he didn't say it was in a piggy bank, but that's what it amounted to. He had a collection of old dimes that he'd been saving up and somebody swiped it out of his luggage at the motel where he's staying."

"What motel?"

"The Robin Hood, on Santa Monica." Slattery shrugged. "So I would have gone out there in the morning and questioned the maid. Maybe she swiped the dimes, maybe she didn't. If she did, she'd deny it and how are you going to prove anything? A handful of dimes is a handful of dimes."

"Nobody kills a man for a few dimes," growled Blocker.

"So how do you know he was killed for that?" demanded Slattery. "At three A.M. it's more likely he got in a fight over a woman in some tavern."

"He was in a public phone booth calling you when he got it."

"Maybe he figured his fifty bucks entitled him to ask me to bodyguard him. How would *I* know what goes through a drunk's head in the middle of the night? He was in a strange town."

"The license plate on his car is a Missouri one," Blocker admitted. "And I got a whiff of booze on him. Booze, mixed with blood."

There was more, but Blocker had weakened. He didn't know enough about his case yet to badger Slattery and Slattery knew very little more than he had already told Blocker. They went around and around for another half hour, then Blocker went his way. But not before warning Slattery of a few dire things to come if he learned later that Slattery had withheld information from him.

Slattery set his alarm clock for eight o'clock, but he did not fall asleep until almost six.

It seemed only minutes before the alarm went off. Slattery got up, but he was in the shower before he remembered the one thing that the recently deceased John F. Ryder had told him and that he had not revealed to his friendly neighborhood detective, Sergeant Blocker.

He had not told him that Ryder had come to Los Angeles to exhibit his collection of dimes at the 17th Annual Numismatic Exhibition.

The coffee was perking when Slattery came out of the shower. He dropped a couple of stale slices of bread in the toaster, then had his breakfast and left the apartment-office.

He got his car from the garage at the rear of the apartment house and he remembered that he had to make a payment on the car loan by the end of the week or else. That was the main reason he had taken the fifty-dollar retainer from the late John F. Ryder.

When he left the garage he drove to Santa Monica, but at the last moment he decided to drive east, instead of west and a few minutes later he parked on Sunset, just east of Highland.

He crossed the street to a ten-foot front shop and stopped to look at a window display of coins and stamps. He noted the gold lettering on the window: BERGSTROM COIN AND STAMP GALLERY.

He went into the store. A buxom, redheaded woman of about forty came from the rear of the shop.

"I'd like to see Mr. Bergstrom," Slattery said.

"He's at the coin show," said the redhead. "I am Mrs. Bergstrom. Perhaps I can help you."

"You probably can. I'd like to see some, uh, dimes."

Mrs. Bergstrom looked Slattery full in the face, then walked back to an open safe. She took out a tray and brought it back to the counter. The tray contained several plastic sheets, with cut-out circles, which contained dimes. Each hole had a printed date below it. The top sheet had every hole filled but two.

Slattery ran a finger along the card until he came to one of the empty places. It was marked: *1894-S (Rare)*.

"Do you have one of these?" he asked. "An 1894-S?"

Mrs. Bergstrom gave Slattery a very long, close look. "How much would you be willing to pay for an 1894-S if we had one?"

Slattery said, easily, "Oh, I might go a couple of dollars if the dime was in real good condition."

Mrs. Bergstrom gathered up the display of dimes and started off with them.

Slattery called: "Wait a minute. I haven't finished."

"Yes, you have," said Mrs. Bergstrom, over her shoulder. She put the dimes back into the safe. "Go home. You might find what you want in your piggy bank."

"I've looked," declared Slattery.

"I've got every doggone dime you can name, but not the 1894-S—"

Mrs. Bergstrom came forward. "You've got every *other* dime?"

"Just about. I'd like to finish my collection." He saw the sourness on Mrs. Bergstrom's face. "I say something wrong?"

"You're a beginner," Mrs. Bergstrom said flatly. "Either that or you're pulling my leg."

Slattery's eyes went down but he could not see Mrs. Bergstrom's nether extremities, because of the counter. She noted the dropping of his eyes, however and picking up a red-covered book she slammed it on the counter before Slattery.

"You can buy this for a dollar seventy-five," she said, testily. "It's the bible of the twenty million coin collectors in this country."

"Will it tell me what a set of dimes is worth?"

"It'll tell you that only twenty-four 1894-S dimes were minted," said Mrs. Bergstrom, "and it'll also tell you that one sold at the Hydeman sale for thirteen thousand dollars."

"Thirteen thousand!" exclaimed Slattery. "For a small thin dime—"

SHORTLY BEFORE noon a huge truck turned into a filling station on Beverly Boulevard. The truck was stopped a few feet from a telephone booth which had a broken window pane. As the driver of the truck began manipulating the huge claw-

crane on the truck, the owner of the filling station left a car on which he was tinkering and came over.

"What the hell!" he exclaimed. "Wouldn't it be easier to fix the glass here than take the whole phone booth to the shop?"

The driver of the truck, who happened to be the private detective, Slattery, in overalls, shut off the winch. "*You* might think that, mister, and *I* might think it, but the phone company doesn't think so." He tapped his temple with a forefinger. "They're the smart ones."

He started up the power again and swung the claw over the phone booth. It descended and gripped the phone booth, crunching out what glass remained. Slattery put the winch into reverse then and the crane lifted the phone booth into the air, snapping the phone wires that were attached to the nearby wall.

The crane swung out and deposited the phone booth onto the back of the truck. Slattery shut off the winch power, waved to the puzzled-looking filling station man and drove off.

An hour later Slattery drove the big rented U-Drive-It truck off a winding lane in the San Fernando Valley, on to a rock and cactus patch. He settled the phone booth onto the rocky ground, raised the claw away from it, then jumped to the ground, a screw-driver and paper sack in his hand. He forced open the door of the booth, went in and in five minutes, using only the screw-driver, opened up the coin box.

He scooped out two handfuls of coins, dumped them into the paper bag and climbed back into the cab of the truck. Seated behind the wheel, he took out nickels, dimes and quarters.

He found what he was looking for inside of sixty seconds. It was a nice, shiny, thin dime, with the date 1894 on the obverse side and the identifying "S" mint mark on the reverse side.

"Thirteen thousand bucks," he said, aloud, as he put the coin into his pocket. He looked out at the badly mauled phone booth, and wondered if A T & T stock would go down as a result.

IT WAS TWO-THIRTY in the afternoon when Slattery entered the exhibit room of the 17th Annual Numismatic Association, in the Santa Monica City Auditorium. He looked at a few displays of ancient Roman and Greek coins, one of American gold coins, a beautiful set of uncirculated Indian head pennies, all "proof" coins, which meant nothing to Slattery.

Then he came upon a small glass case containing a set of American dimes. A hand lettered card stood on a small easel on top of the case. It read: *From the Collection of the Bergstrom Coin Gallery.*

Beside the case stood a scowling, heavy-set man of about forty-five.

Slattery peered through the glass of the case, then looked up at the scowling man. "The set's missing one coin," he said.

"So?"

Slattery shrugged. "You'd think this Bergstrom outfit wouldn't show their stuff unless they had a complete set."

The big man said, "I just happen to be Bergstrom—and what the hell's it to you?"

"It don't mean a damn to me," said Slattery, "but I used to know a fellow once had a complete set of these dimes."

"So did I," retorted Bergstrom, "until some damn thief stole my 1894-S." His eyes suddenly narrowed. "This fellow you say had a complete set of dimes—what was his name?"

"Man I knew back in Missouri, name of Ryder, John F.—"

Bergstrom let out a scream like a stuck pig. "Ryder! That's the dirty crook who—" He lunged for Slattery and gripped the lapels of Slattery's coat, in a huge fist. "What're you trying to pull? You fencing for Ryder?"

Slattery gripped the big man's fist with both of his hands. He gave a violent twist, tore the clenched hand away from his coat and stepped quickly back.

Ryder's dead," he snapped. "Which you know damn well." He sidestepped Bergstrom's rush at him, chopped down on the big man's neck with a judo chop and the coin dealer hit the floor on his face. He was choking as he tried to get up and then Sergeant Blocker grabbed Slattery by the arm and whirled him around.

"Thought I'd find you here," he snapped. He turned to Bergstrom, who was climbing to his feet, the lust for blood showing plainly in his eyes. "Hold it. I'm a police officer." He whipped out his wallet, flicked it open.

The fight went out of Bergstrom. Sergeant Blocker sent a quick look from the coin dealer to Slattery. "Talk, Slattery!"

"Let him talk," Slattery said.

"Just a difference of opinion, officer," said the big man. "I—I lost my temper, I guess. I swung at him and he—well, he popped me one. I guess I had it coming."

"What did he say to you that made you swing at him?" demanded Blocker.

"Nothing worth mentioning," mumbled Bergstrom. "Just a—a difference of opinion about a coin, that's all."

"I said an 1877 dime wasn't worth more than a dollar," said Slattery. "He said it was worth much more."

Blocker bared his teeth. "All right, how much is an 1877 dime worth?" He was looking at the coin dealer.

Bergstrom gulped hard. "Uh, three dollars. If it's in fine condition."

"And for that you fight?" cried Blocker.

"Coins are my business," said the coin dealer, glumly. "I—I hate to be contradicted by an amateur."

Blocker gave the man a suspicious look, then turned to Slattery.

"Beat it, Slats," he said. "But don't think you're out of the woods on that—that other matter. I'll be seeing you again, probably tomorrow."

"You do that, Block," snapped Slattery.

THE *Robin Hood Motel* was in the 2800-block on Santa Monica Boulevard. It was a very fancy layout, with a restaurant and all. The motel was U-shaped with rooms on the first floor as well as on the second. There were at least fifty rooms. For what Slattery had in mind, he knew that it wouldn't do to ask at the office, what room the last John F. Ryder had occupied.

He went into the restaurant, had a cup of coffee and a piece of blueberry pie and engaged the good-looking young waitress in conversation.

"Isn't this the place where that

fellow was killed in the telephone booth?" he asked, after there had been chit-chat about what good-looking waitresses did when they went off duty.

The girl shuddered. "The guy lived here, but he was killed over in L.A. I knew him the minute I saw his picture in the papers this afternoon. He was in here last night for his dinner. I waited on him. He had liver with crisp bacon, a baked potato, without no butter in it, and coffee. And a piece of pie. Huckleberry, like you're eating."

"Huckleberry?" exclaimed Slattery. "I asked for blueberry pie."

"Huckleberry-blueberry, it's the same thing."

"No, it isn't," said Slattery. "You people in California are always trying to pass off huckleberry pie for blueberry. A huckleberry's a great big, blue berry, but the real blueberry is much smaller. I ought to know. I'm from Missouri and I've eaten enough real blueberries in my time to know one from a huckleberry."

He pushed away the unfinished huckleberry pie.

The waitress regarded Slattery with a jaundiced eye. "And you're the guy who's been talking about what a big time he'd show me after I got off duty?"

Slattery winked at the waitress. "I don't like huckleberry pie," he said, "but where we're going tonight, they won't be serving huckleberry pie." He drew a bill from his pocket and smoothed it out on the counter before him. "What's my bill? Forty-seven cents? Keep the change."

The girl stared at him, open-mouthed. "You kiddin'?"

"No," said Slattery, "I just sort of want you to get an idea of the kind of guy you're going out with tonight. What time did you say you get off duty?"

"Eight o'clock," the girl said. "But I could make it a half hour sooner if you want me to?"

"I wish I could," said Slattery, "but I got a kind of tough job to finish before I get through with my work." He snapped his fingers. "Maybe you could help me."

"How?"

Slattery leaned forward and lowered his voice. "I'm a newspaper photographer. I'll let you in on something. The real reason I'm here is that my city editor assigned me to get a picture of the inside of this—this fellow, Ryder that was killed last night—his room. These motel manager's don't like that kind of publicity and well, I'd have to sort of feel along, take my time, talk to people and get Ryder's room number that way."

"I don't know what room he was in," said the waitress raptly, "Gosh, I'd tell you if I knew."

"But you know the manager of the motel, don't you? Or, maybe some of the help—a chambermaid?"

"Gussie!" the waitress cried.

"She eats here, I slip her a hunk of pie now and then and don't put it on the bill."

"Gussie's on now?" asked Slattery.

The waitress snatched the twenty-dollar bill from in front of Slattery, gave him a wink and went off.

Slattery ate the rest of the huckleberry-blueberry pie, lit a cigarette and had smoked half of it, when the waitress appeared before him.

"Forty-two," she said, "and Gussie won't see you."

Slattery kissed the palm of his hand, blew it at the waitress and got up from his stool. "I'll be waiting at seven-thirty," he said.

He left the restaurant and crossed the parking lot, half-filled with cars. He climbed a flight of stairs and went along the U-shaped veranda until he came to a door marked 42. He already had a ring of keys in his hand. The third one unlocked the door. If it hadn't, the fourth or fifth one would have, for the five keys on the ring were guaranteed to open any hotel or motel lock in the city. And most other cities, too. Slattery had bought them from a mail order house for $3.95, plus twenty cents postage.

He went into the late John F. Ryder's room, shot the bolt on the door and flicked on the light switch.

The room was furnished in late California motel-motif style. The furniture consisted of a bed, a chest of drawers, two chairs and a bedside stand on which were a small lamp and a yellow telephone.

A somewhat worn valise stood open on one of the chairs. There were patches of fingerprint powder on it and Slattery knew that the police had been here. That meant that the room had had a going-over.

He stood with his back to the door. There was no use searching the obvious places. The police had done that. He went into the bathroom, raised the lid of the w.c. Nothing in it but the regular gimmicks. He looked behind the shower curtain.

The medicine cabinet would be a waste of time. There was a small ground-glass window beside the medicine cabinet. Slattery unlocked the window and raised the lower section. He stuck his head out of the window and found what he was looking for.

It was a small black leather roll,

about a foot in length and some four or five inches thick. A strap was around the roll and the end of the strap was stuck to the wall with two strips of adhesive plaster.

Slattery peeled off the adhesive plaster and brought the roll into the bedroom. He unfastened the strap, unrolled the leather covering and looked at a very nice assortment of burglar's tools.

Ryder had been a professional burglar.

Which did not surprise Slattery by this time.

AT SEVEN-THIRTY, Slattery sat in the swivel chair in his office-living room. He looked at his watch and shook his head. Well, the waitress had twenty dollars, or at least $19.53 to console her for being stood up.

The door buzzer did not whirr until five minutes to eight. Slattery brought his hand up from below the desk. There was a .38 Police Special in it.

"The door's open," he called out.

The door opened, revealing the buxom Mrs. Bergstrom. She saw the pistol in Slattery's hand. "You were expecting me?"

"I was expecting your husband," Slattery said.

"That tower of jelly!" snorted Mrs. Bergstrom. "I heard what you did to him this afternoon. Little punk like you. I'd like to see you try that on me."

"I gave him a judo chop," said Slattery.

"Judo-schmudo," jeered Mrs. Bergstrom. "I was a Wac in Korea. I weighed twenty pounds less then, but I'd have taken on any of your boy Marines, judo or karate, or just a good punch in the jaw. Bergstrom's big and he's got a loud mouth, but he's a rabbit. Can't stand the sight of blood."

"You're telling me that *you* killed John Ryder, not your husband?"

Mrs. Bergstrom stepped aside, into the room, gestured for Slattery to take a look out into the hall. Slattery did just that, edging past Mrs. Bergstrom and risking only a fast peek up and down the hall. Then he sidled back, into the room.

Mrs. Bergstrom slammed the door shut. "I want that dime," she snapped. "I know you've got it and I know how you got it."

"How?" asked Slattery.

"You rented a U-Drive-It truck," said Mrs. Bergstrom, belligerently. "Then you drove into that filling station and picked up the whole shebang. You've got more nerve than a brass monkey and if you hand over that dime, I'm gonna let you get away with it.

"You're my kind of man and I don't mind telling you that I wouldn't even mind horsing around with you afterwards. But business is business and let's get that out of the way first."

"Mrs. Bergstrom," said Slattery.

"I like you. You're my type of woman, but the late John F. Ryder hired me to do a little job for him."

"Like what?" demanded Mrs. Bergstrom.

"He said somebody'd stolen his collection of dimes and he wanted me to get them back for him."

Mrs. Bergstrom's nostrils distended. "You got to be kidding, Mister. Ryder stole that dime from me." She made a pawing gesture with a fleshy hand. "I know—he sold me the dime the day before, but that night he stole it back. What's more, he's the same man who pulled that little trick on Mellenkov, back in Boston, a year ago. And the devil knows how many more times he pulled it.

"Nobody likes to let people know they've been a sucker and Mellenkov's the only one who squawked to the police, but I'll bet Ryder pulled that little stunt a dozen times in the last couple of years. Sold the coin for whatever he could get, five, seven, maybe eight thousand, then burgled the shop and got it back."

"That's the one thing I couldn't figure out," said Slattery. "Why he came to me. It was insurance in case you blew the whistle. He'd had his coin stolen and he could prove it, because he'd hired himself a private detective. That brought it down to—you call him a thief, he calls you one. Confuse the issue and give him a chance to make a run for it. How much did you pay him for the dime?"

"I went the route," snapped Mrs. Bergstrom. "Ten thousand. But Bergstrom had a pigeon lined up who was coming to the convention to buy the whole set of dimes. Twenty-two thousand, five hundred if we had the 1894-S with the set. I knew about Ryder, too, but I didn't think he was a good enough burglar to crack our safe, much less get into the shop. We got a pretty fancy burglar alarm. I was wrong. Ryder made it and got the dime. He didn't take a damn thing else, just the 1894-S—"

TWO THINGS happened. The phone rang and the apartment door burst open. Slattery, moving to answer the phone, had to whirl back and Bergstrom was on him then.

The tower of jelly, as his wife had described him, turned out to

be a man of iron. He had a gun in his fist, as he lunged for Slattery. Slattery chopped down with his own gun. His gun struck Bergstrom's forearm, knocked the gun from his fist, but Bergstrom had a very good left hand, with which he struck Slattery in the throat.

It was a good two minutes before Slattery was able to sit up on the floor and stop gasping. By that time Bergstrom had not only gathered up the two revolvers, his own and Slattery's, but had gone through Slattery's trousers pocket and found the 1894-S dime.

The phone, meanwhile, was still ringing, for neither Mr. or Mrs. Bergstrom had taken the receiver from the hook and whoever was calling Slattery was persistent.

Bergstrom was patient. When Slattery finally looked up at him, the coin gallery owner said, "On your feet, punk!"

"Go away," groaned Slattery, "You've got the coin. Leave me alone."

"Can't," Bergstrom said cheerfully, "on account of Molly couldn't keep from shooting off her face and told you the whole thing. That fuzz-buddy of yours, who was nice enough to tell me your name this afternoon, he might put a few things together, with what you could tell him and wham—San Quentin."

"What I didn't tell him, Sweetie," said Molly Bergstrom, "was that you were one Marine I couldn't lick with Judo and that was why I decided to marry you."

The phone suddenly stopped ringing.

Slattery climbed to his feet. "I searched Ryder's room at the Robin Hood Motel early in the evening. I found a very nice set of burglar tools there. That proves he was a burglar and if I testify in your behalf at the trial, you can beat the rap. A man's got a right to retrieve from a burglar what was stolen from him."

"With two thirty-eight slugs?" asked Bergstrom. "I don't think I'll take a chance. What I do think we'll do is walk you down to my car, out front, in which we'll get, nice and easy, with Molly holding the roscoe on you and then we'll drive out to San Fernando Valley, to some nice, quiet place and leave you there like I left Ryder in the telephone booth last night."

Slattery gave Mrs. Bergstrom a reproachful look. "So it was him, after all."

"I had to con you," Mrs. Bergstrom said cheerfully. "Soften you up, so he could make his big entrance, which he did very nice."

"Because the telephone rang then." said Slattery. "Which was a little stunt I had worked out with Sergeant Blocker, who was waiting in the next apartment." He smiled. "Don't look now, but the sergeant's right behind you."

Bergstrom didn't look, but Mrs. Bergstrom turned heavily—and

let out a bleat. Bergstrom whirled then and Blocker shot the .38 out of his hand, without drawing a drop of blood from Bergstrom's hand. He was one of the best pistol shots in the police department.

After he had handcuffed Mr. and Mrs. Bergstrom together, Sergeant Blocker said to Slattery, "You scraped through this one with the police department, but what about the telephone company, Slattery? They're going to make you put that telephone booth back where you got it and they're going to charge you for the breakage and the job of splicing the wires and such."

"I'll pay them," barked Slattery.

"With what? The fifty-dollar fee you got from Ryder?"

"No. I spent that for the truck rental. Twenty-five of it, anyway and they'll probably charge me another twenty-five tomorrow when I rent the truck again to take the booth back to the filling station." He suddenly brightened. "I forgot the money that was in the coin box. Twenty-eight, thirty-five. Somebody must have been making some long distance calls from that box."

He frowned as he saw the scowl on Sergeant Blocker's face. "Hell, man, I solved a murder case for you. You're going to let me beat the phone company out of a measly twenty-eight, thirty-five, aren't you?"

"No," said Blocker, "but I'll tell you what I'll do. I'll lend you twenty-eight, thirty-five. You can pay me back from your next case." His voice became hard, typical-Blocker. "And if it's a police case, you'll cooperate, by God, or I'll have your license revoked!"

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BORN TO BE KILLED

by EDWARD Y. BREESE

She was a lady, he a dope-crazed punk. Yet something was drawing them together, no matter what any one could do. Something that was a little like love—a little like murder.

I COUNTED THE needles again. There were still four of them, and four of the little packets of white powder. Out on the street she was walking away from me, to a new life.

I wanted to be sick to my stomache. I wasn't. I've been a cop for eighteen years, and I don't get sick any more. But I wanted to.

I saw her first at the same time all of us did, when she came in out of the street to the counter of Benny's All Night Eatery.

All the conversation stopped. For a minute I thought even the big overhead fan had stopped clacking and stirring the smoke and whiskey and hot grease mixture Benny's customers breathed. She was that kind.

How do I say it? Her face was as delicate and as beautiful as the one on my grandmother's treasured cameo pin. Her eyes were blue as the sky over a green hill and her cheeks had the country bloom of a ripened peach. She was sixteen-I-wish-I-was-nineteen, and she looked at us as trustfully as if we'd been the folks in Mr. Somebody's drug store back home.

There wasn't a soul in the place but knew she'd come in. Mostly we just looked at her and hoped she wouldn't notice us. She made

us think of what we might have been. The short-order cook blushed when he wiped off the counter for her.

I was over at my usual table by the window with detective Povacs of my squad and Brannigan, the cop on the beat. I was still celebrating promotion. Since Benny's was the only all night restaurant in the tenderloin, I'd come in for a two-inch prime steak and fried onions and beer. It was all on Benny, of course.

I'm Terry Moore. For two weeks I'd been Captain Moore—moved over from Homicide and up from lieutenant to command the Rackets Squad. There'd been a major shake-up after Cap-

tain Charles Greco died in the flaming wreck of his Cadillac.

Charley hadn't been liked. It had been an open secret that he took more orders from Big Herman, the fence, than he did from Chief Miller. Some said if he'd lived a month longer, the grand jury would have brought an indictment. It was better for the force that he died when and how he did.

Afterwards his squad was pretty well broken up. A couple of his men took "voluntary" retirement, and most of the rest were shifted to jobs where they couldn't throw any weight around or do any harm. When the smoke cleared away, I was captain of the Rackets Squad, with a free hand to pick my own men and go to work on some characters who'd seemed to lead charmed lives up to this point.

Right at that moment though my mind wasn't on the rackets. I couldn't take my eyes off the girl at the counter. She was slight and still a little puppy-awkward and so very young. Everything about her, from the way her hair was done to the cheap cardboard suitcase and the worn topcoat said, "Country—fresh come to town." I didn't know what brought her, but I was already sure she shouldn't have come.

Everybody in Benny's reacted to her being there. The perverts at the rear tables stopped squealing at each other and forked their food instead. The two winos at the end of the counter put their filthy hats in their laps and watched her, fascinated. Red Maudie, the hustler got up and went out, taking with her the sailor who was buying her beer. Big Harry the bookie, a notorious family man, began to look fatherly and protective. So did I, I suppose.

Most surprising of all, the young punks and muggers in their bright sport shirts and tight pants and long hair failed to pelt her with the usual whistles and wisecracks. These were tough little boys. Now they were only muggers and sneak thieves, numbers runners and pimps, but there wasn't a one who didn't feel himself headed for the big time. Someday every lad of the lot would try for the big jewel heist or a million dollar snatch, and my men and I would have to kill them, or be killed trying. They knew it, and they knew I knew.

That was away ahead. This night they were still young and full of ambition. Deep down they knew they couldn't win, and so they ran scared all the time. To cover it up they had to talk filthy and live fast and try endlessly to prove how tough they were. In a few years they'd be smart enough to be cautious, but they were still too young.

In the state they were in any woman was fair game, but the country girl held them silent. I didn't know if it was surprise or respect. I don't suppose they knew, and I was sure it wouldn't last.

Pat Povacs saw it too.

"A miracle," he said.

The girl was talking to the young short order cook. There wasn't another sound but grease frying and the big fan slapping the air.

"Just got off the bus," she was saying. "I'm going to get a job here in the city. Now I wonder if you could recommend a nice hotel near here. It can't be expensive."

That was a stumper for Bill, the cook. In that section the cheap hotels weren't nice, and the nice ones weren't cheap. He didn't know what to answer, and he didn't want to say so.

Big Harry got him off the hook. Fast thinking is part of the bookie business.

"Excuse me, miss," he said. "I'm sure the place for you is Ma Brown's boarding house. It's not fancy, but Ma's a good woman. I know her well. If you don't mind I'll walk you over there after you finish your supper."

The girl looked embarrassed.

"Really," she said. "I wasn't going to eat anything. I just came in to ask." It was two in the morning and she'd obviously been on the bus all day without food. She had to be hungry.

"Nonsense," Harry said. "I was just about to have a hamburger and a big bowl of hot soup myself. I'd count it a favor if you'd keep me company. Put it out, Bill."

"Yes, sir," Bill said.

The girl looked grateful.

That was the first we saw of Amy Jean. At the time I hoped it would be the last, that she would go away home or to a better town, or at least a nicer part of town.

Of course she didn't. She moved into a side room at Ma Brown's, and right away got herself a job at the dime store in the tenderloin. She took to eating at Benny's. It was the only place around that was more than a hamburger stand and less than a strip or clip joint. Besides she liked us. We were the only familiar faces, and she was lonely. She took to coming in late for coffee and conversation.

Because she was lonely she talked her head off to Bill or Harry or anyone who'd listen. It wasn't long until we knew all about her. She was Amy Jean Robershaw, and she came off a farm upstate. Her Pa's folks were all farmers, but Maw's elder brother was a preacher. She had five brothers and five sisters, and the farm was crowded and the chores something awful. She'd quit school when, she insisted, she was eighteen and come down out of the red clay country to our town.

Everybody said things were so much better in the city. Didn't we think so? After she got settled a bit more, she'd finish high school at night classes.

Inside of a week everybody in the place loved her. The winos would have lain down in a puddle so she could walk dry-shod. Young

Bill worshiped her openly. The hustlers kept their men clean-mouthed when she was in the place. My men and I let it be known what would happen to any man who bothered her, and for once none of the punks challenged us.

It was pitiful the way all of Benny's regulars watched for her to smile.

She smiled a lot, too. Once she got to feel at home, Amy Jean was always laughing and kidding around. First and last she brought more sunshine into Benny's than some of the regulars had seen since they were her age themselves. As for me, when I looked at her I saw the daughter I might have had if I'd ever married.

There was only one of us who didn't accept the picture quite without question. Perhaps he saw, or sensed, a "small cloud, no bigger than a man's hand" in the sky of our idyll. More likely it was just instinct.

He was Father Paul from the Gesu Church, two blocks down and a block west from Benny's. He's the one the papers call the parish priest of the tenderloin. He's been with us twenty years and night and day he goes up and down our grimy streets to do his Lord's business. Everybody trusts Father Paul.

He shared a steak with me in Benny's one night when Amy Jean was holding forth at the counter. He looked at her, and, "A pity," he said. "A terrible pity."

Of course I thought I knew what he meant. "Don't worry, Father," I said. "There's no one here will do harm to the child. If any man thinks to do so, he knows well what the rest of us feel. I promise you she's as safe here as she would be home on the farm."

He gave me a long and steady look.

"I know, Captain Moore," he said. "I know what you say is true. Perhaps that's why I say a pity. She's exactly as safe as she would be at home."

I thought about that for a minute or two.

"You're trying to tell me something," I said at last.

"I am, Terry. I am indeed, but it's nothing that you wish to hear. Indeed I'm not sure either that I'd want to hear it myself or that it has to be true. So I'll not say it. There's no need."

I think I knew even then what he would have said. It's the same thought that should have been in my own mind, if I hadn't insisted on seeing only what I wanted to see. Amy Jean shouldn't have been at Benny's at all. So why was she there? Water, I thought, has to find its own level. Then I pushed that thought aside. I refused to follow it further.

"Have some more coffee with me, Father," I said.

It wasn't long after that that

Billy Fred Millsap came back to town.

Billy Fred was war chief of our young punks. His parents came out of the slash pine country over by the big swamp, but Billy Fred lived in a swamp of his own full of dark places and poisonous creatures. He grew up in an alley and graduated to the tenderloin. His milk teeth were cut on a switchblade knife, and he stole from the time he could walk. When a neighbor beat him for theft, he set fire to the man's house. At least he took credit for the fire, though it was never proved.

He was twenty-four, thin-hipped and wide-shouldered as that breed are till the middle-age belly builds. He wore skin tight pants and mod jackets and neon shirts and a white cowboy hat. Instead of long hair, he cropped his short. There were tattoos on both forearms and a naked dancer on his stomach.

He'd been in reform school at fourteen for attempted rape, and later served a year and a day for atrocious assault with a broken beer bottle. It would have been murder, if the man he cut hadn't had friends to intervene in the fight. Because of that sentence Billy Fred no longer had civil rights.

In the eyes of the men on the force he had no rights at all. We watch these kids born and we watch them grow. By the time

they're twelve we know which ones will make it and which ones won't. Some of them stick to school and get jobs and marry and grow out of the tenderloin. Some of them get to City Hall and once in a long while one makes it to Elm Avenue.

Billy Fred would never be one of those. He was too stupid to learn and too mean to adjust. He'd never be able to pull his weight in the world. He'd go on looking for the easy way, stealing and grifting, hurting the weak and running from the strong.

We'd watch him, as we did them all, until the day he got in too far over his head. When we really had

him—not for ninety days, but for a ten year rap—we'd lower the boom. That pattern would repeat like a stuck record until he got desperate. Then we'd have to kill him.

Billy Fred was born to be killed. To die by violence in an alley or a cheap rooming house. From the day he was born he lived under the gun. Afterwards nobody would mourn him. Nobody at all.

For myself I'd hoped Billy Fred had left our town permanently for greener fields. He'd gone north a year before this time. The grapevine said he'd quarreled with Big Herman Schmidt over some loot he was fencing and had to run for his life. Now that Big Herman was dead I guess he felt safe to come back.

Billy Fred walked into Benny's at one o'clock on a Friday morning. He still wore his white hat, but the mod clothes were traded for an Italian silk suit and sixty dollar Dallas boots. He was smoking a cigar.

Amy Jean was having coffee and pie at the counter after a late movie. Business was slow. Bill, the cook, was standing by the grille, watching her with stars in his eyes. Big Harry was urging her to have another piece of pie.

Billy Fred took in the tableau from over by the door. I saw his eyes widen and his shoulders snap back, the way those punks always do when they go on the make. I pushed my chair back a little from the table and made ready to move fast, if I had to.

He fooled me. Maybe he'd learned something in the north. Instead of starting something right off, he moved as quiet and as peacefully as a college boy. He even took off his hat and hung it on the wall. Then he went over and sat down on the other side of her from Harry, with an empty seat between. He knew well enough nobody else would sit between them.

He didn't even look at her till he'd finished looking at the menu card and ordering a steak. Then he looked past her and said hello to Harry.

I could tell by the set of Harry's jaw where he wanted to tell the punk to go. I could read his mind when he decided not to. Harry's runners were mostly young punks, and Billy Fred was king of the punks. He could cost Harry a lot of money, if he really wanted to. He said hello back.

Amy Jean watched this with those innocent eyes of hers. I could tell she'd known it the minute Billy Fred came in. How did I know? She didn't say anything or stare at him. She just looked different all of a sudden. Any woman can do it, and any man can tell. Now she looked at Harry, perfectly guilelessly.

"Oh," she said, "are you two friends? Won't you introduce me, Harry?"

That tore it. I'd been waiting for Billy Fred to try something. If he'd spoken first, I'd have taken him in for questioning right there and then. If he'd tried talking back, I'd have slapped him soggy and wrung him out like a dirty dishrag. I was just waiting.

This way there was nothing I could do—nothing that wouldn't just make him look abused and put-upon in her eyes. By the way he acted, he put us dead in the wrong if we tried to warn her or to interfere. Maybe if Father Paul had been there, he could have thought of something. But he wasn't. Brannigan and Povacs and I just sat there with our jaws hanging.

I still say the Billy Fred type are never really smart. Not smart the way other people are. But at times they're shrewd. This was one of those times.

He was smart enough to keep up the act for a couple of weeks. I think she expected him to stay and talk to her that first night. He didn't. After he finished the biggest steak in the house, he put on his hat and went off somewhere.

He came back, though. Oh, he came back riding a white horse and with bells on as far as she was concerned. He played it like he wrote the book on women. I'd never have given him credit unless I'd seen it myself.

The first couple of nights he just managed to sit next to Amy Jean at the counter and smile at her and let her do most of the talking. The next night he sat at the far end of the counter with one of the dancers from the Happy Hour. Then he didn't show at all for three nights running.

When he came back she just about climbed into his lap, and that night he walked her home to Ma Brown's. The next night he took her to a late movie, and on her day off at the store to a ball game.

That's all it was from there on out, a ball game. Billy Fred did the pitching, and Amy Jean caught everything he tossed her way.

Of course all of Benny's regulars were up in arms by this time, or at least each of us reacted in his own way. The winos looked more miserable than ever when she came in. The perverts gabbled spitefully among themselves. Big Harry tried to monopolize her time and got nowhere. Billy the cook lost weight and watched her with haggard eyes. I wondered what would happen if he ever got Billy Fred under that knife he trimmed the meat with.

Povacs and I shook Billy Fred down four times in hopes of finding a gun or something, anything, we could run him in for. We got exactly nowhere. He laughed at us.

"You bulls," he said, "give me a real laugh. You got nothin' on me, and you know it. Whyn't ya leave me be? Are all bulls born stupid?"

We didn't even dare rough the

punk up like he needed. He'd just have told her where the bruises came from. Then she never would have trusted us again.

We knew he was running a numbers route. If we pinched him for that, he'd be out on bail in ten minutes. We thought he might have pulled a couple of gas station heists too, but there wasn't any evidence. He lived up at the Acme Hotel, but we couldn't even shake down that crummy pad without a search warrant. We talked about getting one, but decided to wait till we had at least probable cause.

"It'll work out okay, Cap," Povacs said one night. "He'll make a mistake. You know that. They all make mistakes sooner or later. All we got to do is wait."

"I know it," I said. "But that don't help a little bit. I want him *now.*"

"So do I. So does everybody around, but these ain't the old days. We gotta wait. He has to make a slip. When he does, we clobber him."

"When he does," I said, "we kill him. That's what we do."

The same night I asked Father Paul to help.

"You don't have to ask, Terry," he said, "for you know it's been on my heart. I'll try. She's not of my faith, you know. I can't speak as I would if she were."

"I'm not of your faith, either, Father. But what you say weighs heavy with me. It's not dogma you'll be talking to her. Just common sense, and maybe the words that will save her from sorrow. I wish you'd try."

He tried, but it wasn't any good. "I'm afraid that her heart is full of the young man, Terry. And her ears are full of her heart. She listened to me speak, but she did not feel any of my words. She believes, I think, that he will be a good man because of her."

"We know better," I said. "There's no good in him and never will be."

He gave me a quizzical half-smile.

"My Boss wouldn't believe that," he said.

I knew what he meant. "Your Boss isn't a man, Father. And I'm only a man. I'll wait till Billy Fred proves me right. Then—"

He interrupted. "Then you'll do what the law tells you, Captain. Nothing more. I hope that's what you mean."

We let it drop at that.

Two days later Amy Jean and Billy Fred went down to City Hall and were married. They came back to Benny's and showed the license around to the day crew. I wasn't there. I couldn't have stood it, nor could Billy the cook. Big Harry was at the counter waiting for the results from Garden State to come over the radio.

"Her eyes were shining," he told me later. Harry was Jewish but he had an Irish turn of speech. "Her

eyes were full of all the stars in heaven. It choked me to see."

"It's not you I'd have choked," I said. "How was that good lad, the bridegroom?"

"Grinning from ear to ear, and strutting like a fighting cock," Harry said. "He said to give you and Father Paul his regards."

He took her to Miami for a week of honeymoon. When they came back he moved her into one of the kitchenette flats in the annex back of the Acme. One window looked into an alley and the other two into the rubbish patch in the middle of the block.

She spoke proudly of "our new home," but she took her old job back at the dime store. Billy Fred went back to running numbers. He took her around the bars and strip joints with him at night—to show her off to his pals, I suppose.

I guess that may have been why he married her. He had something to show off that was far too good for him. He wore her like one of the tramps he used to run with would have worn the Hope diamond.

And he cheapened her, the way a tramp could.

On his arm her beauty was somehow dulled. Not everybody saw it. Her spell was too strong. Billy the cook was walking death those days. But Father Paul and I saw. We didn't have to say anything. Our hearts bled within us.

We both knew that sooner or later there'd be no one new to show her off to.

It was sooner than either of us thought. Before summer was really warm that year he'd begun running the night alone again. Sometimes she was with him, and sometimes not. She was ashamed to come into Benny's alone at first. He came and went as he pleased. Once he brought in the redhead from the Happy Hour. Young Bill burned their steaks and looked red murder at them. Even the rest of the chicken-punks of his own sort sat apart from them.

After a while she took to showing up again. She tried to look and act the same, but nobody was fooled. It was a new Amy Jean. The open, outgoing girl wasn't with us any more. This was a woman who had put a wall about herself somehow—a wall that was first defiant, then hard. We couldn't get through.

Then the word began to come back through the stoolies.

"Billy Fred's hitting the powder —using dope. Billy Fred's pushing the stuff." This was something different from numbers running, but equally hard to pin down. Our town's narcotics trade was syndicate controlled. That meant influence and top-flight lawyers. It gave us something to go on, though. Nail him for dope selling, and we'd have Billy Fred for sure.

Then Amy Jean stayed out of Benny's for a whole week. One of Red Maudie's girls saw her in the dime store with a black eye and a bandage on one arm.

"He's started beating her up," she reported. We knew Amy Jean would deny it, and she did.

Time passed. Amy Jean wore bruises more often than a new hairdo. There was a rumor that he'd tried to pimp her one night, but she refused. Next day her cheek was black and blue where he'd slapped her around. After that I had to speak to Billy the cook.

"You do anything, and I'll just have to run you in," I said. "Wait, boy, wait. He'll make his slip. He's got to. He can't ever help it. When he does I'll put him away all legal and proper. Don't you see, there's no need for you to use that knife. No need, boy." His eyes smoldered back at me. The carborundum stone went whick, whick on the blade of the big carver.

"This has got to break soon," I told Father Paul, "or I'll have to take that fine lad for murder."

He drank his coffee. "When you take Billy Fred yourself," he asked, "will it be murder? Can you honestly say that it won't be?"

"I've thought it through, Father," I said. "It will not. I will not move till I have enough to send him up for a long time. Unless he tries to kill me, all I'll do is take him in. If he dies at my hand it must be self-defense. Oh, I'll admit I'd like to shoot him down, like the vermin he is. But, Father, I'm no Charley Greco. I don't wear the badge for myself but for the law. There's such a thing as an honest cop, and God help me I'm it."

"I'm glad you are," he told me.

"Rest easy. I am," I said.

It was a fine resolve and I meant honestly to keep it.

What happened was none of my doing. None of my doing at all.

It was the wild, sick, stupid mind of Billy Fred Millsap that brought things to a head. He was like all of the wild punks. He couldn't let well enough alone. It wasn't in him. It's not in any of them.

Perhaps he had loved Amy Jean at first, as much as it was ever in his like to love. That was over and done. He had other women. Now he hated his wife. He resented the way he loved her. He wanted to hurt us by hurting her and show

us all the scorn and bitterness he felt. He wanted to hurt the world, and most of all to hurt Amy Jean.

Maybe all that was in his mind, maybe lots more. Who knows what moves in the brain of a junky? It's sure he was stoned when he did it.

It was just about midnight on a Friday that he tried his move. I was alone at the "police table" by the window. I had Pat Povacs on stake-out and Brannigan was breaking up a fight down the block. Billy Fred was stoned glass-eyed at the counter, talking to a drunk wearing a tuxedo and a convention badge. He was talking low and snickering and showing him a snapshot out of his wallet.

We could see the drunk make up his mind. He gave some money out of his pocket to Billy Fred—did it clumsily, trying to hide the bills. They got off the counter stools and went out the door, both of them staggering some as they walked.

Billy Fred looked right at me and laughed as they went. There was wildness and hate in his crazy eyes. At the corner they turned right, towards the Acme Annex. It was plain enough what Billy Fred was up to. He wanted us to know.

Young Bill came out from behind the counter with that knife of his. Big Harry caught at him and he never even noticed. I hit him behind the ear with my leather wrapped slung shot and brought him down in his tracks. It was that or see murder done. He never even knew what hit him.

"Take care of the lad," I told Harry.

Five or six of Billy Fred's pals were in the place.

"If any one of you leaves here before I come back," I said to them," I'll kill him with my bare hands. Understand."

"We understand," one of them said. "Don't worry, Cap. We're on your side this time." I guess they were at that. Like the rest of us they'd lived with this over the months.

I loosened the Police Positive in its belt holster and unbuttoned my jacket to swing free. I was glad Father Paul wasn't in Benny's.

The Acme had an elevator of sorts, but its annex didn't. The housekeeping flats were reached by old wooden stairs from a door opening onto the alley. I was halfway up to their third floor flat when all hell broke loose up there. What with Bill and all, I'd taken too much time.

There was screaming and a wild yell and the slam-thud of running feet. There were shots, close together, from a .38. The drunk came past me down the stairs, half running and half falling. His mouth was open, but no sound came out. I let him go.

I hit the landing running with my own gun out and the hammer thumbed back. There was absolute dead silence from behind the half

closed door of Billy Fred's. Down the hall other tennants popped out, saw my gun, and popped back in like something in a dream.

I went through the door in a long jump, swinging my gun to cover the room.

There was no need. Billy Fred was on his back on the floor. There was blood on his chest, and one shot had just about torn off his lower jaw. He wasn't handsome any more.

Amy Jean stood straight up like a soldier at attention against the far wall. Her arms were rigid at her sides, and the gun was on the floor at her feet. Her eyes were wide open, but seeing nothing. In the light of the single overhead bulb they were as blue as the old China design plates at home. She looked like a frightened child.

First I picked up the gun and then I looked around. It was plain enough what had happened. Billy Fred had brought the lush in and she'd refused him. There was a fresh bruise on her cheek where Billy Fred had hit her. She'd gotten his gun—one dresser drawer stood open—and shot him with it. That was all.

The place was a shoddy mess of dirt and unwashed dishes. In the back room the beds were unmade. On the bedroom dresser top I saw what I needed to see. Lying close together were seven or eight cheap hypodermic needles and at least a dozen little folded packets of white paper. It was Billy Fred's dope supply.

I hated to touch her but I slapped awareness back into Amy Jean's eyes.

"I killed him," she moaned.

"No," I said. "I killed him, Amy Jean. You must remember it that way. I came up here and he was beating you. When I tried to stop him he pulled his gun. I got it away from him and killed him. He was choking me. That's the way it was."

She stared at me. I knew she couldn't testify or be questioned and remember.

"You get out," I said. "Get out of this town and never come back. When I show the dope to prove what he was nobody will care that he's dead. He was never important anyway. Nobody will follow you. You just get out of town." I knew that was true enough.

She must have known it too. Hope came back in her eyes.

"Yes," she said. "Yes. Thank you, Cap."

"Get your things," I said.

I got Billy Fred's wallet out of his pocket. There was about two hundred dollars in bills, enough to get her home. I covered the body with a throw rug. Amy Jean came out of the bedroom wearing a topcoat and carrying the same cardboard suitcase she'd brought to town.

I stuffed the bills in her handbag.

"Get out of town," I said.

"Take the first bus. Don't worry about me. I may even get a medal for this. Just don't ever come back to this town."

"I won't," she said. "Truly I won't. Thank you again, Cap."

I heard her heels tap down the wooden stairs. When I went back into the bedroom there were only four needles on the dresser top, and four little white packets. I counted them again. I wanted to be sick.

Father Paul had been right all along. The Amy Jean we all loved would never have come to us in the beginning. Mix oil and water, and the water finds its own level. It has to.

Amy Jean was going home, okay, but home wasn't back on the farm.

ATTENTION—ALL MYSTERY FANS

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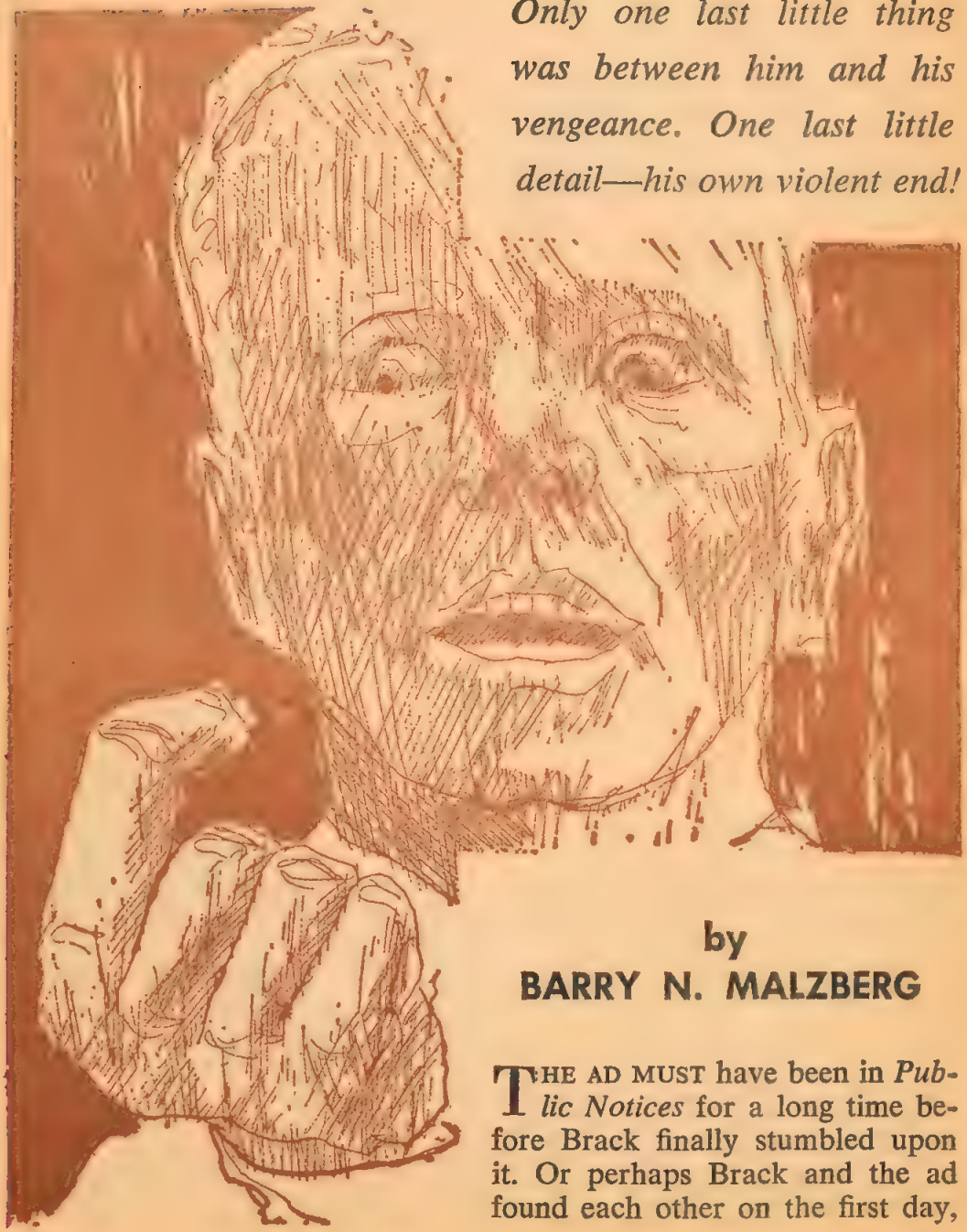
No Grace Period



Only one last little thing was between him and his vengeance. One last little detail—his own violent end!

by
BARRY N. MALZBERG

THE AD MUST have been in *Public Notices* for a long time before Brack finally stumbled upon it. Or perhaps Brack and the ad found each other on the first day,

like old thieves thrown into the same pen. In any case, there it was, and on May 1st at 9:30, he found himself staring with fascination at the stark lines of type:

MEN/WOMEN 21-65: Dissatisfied? Trapped? Job giving you no satisfaction? We don't have a job for you but we have something better—much better. Call Al: 874-8741.

Brack was on his first coffee break of the day. Carefully he finished his hot chocolate; carefully he wiped his lips. Then, he looked furtively left and right, decided that the others in the lounge were as bored and tired as he and without the energy to care about his activities. He went quietly to the pay phone in the corner and dialed a number.

"Seven forty-one," a woman's voice said briskly.

"I want to talk to Al."

"Is this in response to our advertisement?"

"That's right."

"Your name please, sir? And your occupation?"

"I am a greeting card versifier," Brack said hoarsely. "I write poems for special occasions, mostly the national holidays. My name—my name is Albert Brack."

"Thank you. One moment, please."

Brack waited, the way he always waited on phones, scratching himself and feeling obscurely shamed. There were hissing buzzes, a hint of voices talking hurriedly. Then a man's voice with a vaguely foreign accent said, "May I help you?"

"I called for Al. It is about—"

"My name is Al. You are the Mr. Brack who writes greeting card messages?"

"That's right."

"I give you an appointment for three o'clock today. Room one eleven at four fifty-two Park Street. Just ask for Al."

"Three o'clock? But it's a work day. I don't know if I could—"

The voice chuckled. "If you call Al," it said, "then part of your problem is this reluctance to offend your employer. Just tell him you are sick and must leave. I am not prepared to give you such basic instruction."

"But I think—"

"I do not care what you think," the voice said pleasantly. "I see you here at three, no?"

Brack choked. "All right," he said. "I'll—I'll be there."

"That is fine," said the voice. "That is the first step. There will be many more to follow." It hung up on him.

Brack went dazedly back to his desk trying not to think of the conversation and began to work on Thanksgiving Series thirty-seven as if it were the only thing in the world. But it was no good; there was a whining voice within him and the voice was asking questions,

questions like: *Why did you make that call? And are things so hopeless that you turn to sucker ads for escape?* and *Why don't you take care of Fishe yourself? Why can't you be a man and handle the situation like a man? Can't you do anything on your own?*

The voice raved and raved. Brack shuddered and found himself putting his hands to his ears to stop it but it didn't work. Nothing worked at all until he finally became immersed in the work itself and began to write a poem. Then the old purpose returned; he forgot everything in the intricate joy of putting a verse together and he lost himself in it for a while, rhyming *turkey* with *murky, cheer* with *fear.*

It was a good poem, the best Thanksgiving poem he had ever written. He put it in his out basket and, the voice temporarily forgotten, turned to another one. Al didn't matter. It was beginning to look like a good morning after all.

His inter-office phone rang.

"Brack!" Fishe screamed, "Get in here this second. *This second.*"

Brack shuddered and went into his supervisor's office.

The fat copy chief watched Brack enter, ordered him with a gesture to close the door and then without preparation of any kind, leapt from his desk and threw Brack's Thanksgiving poem in his face.

"What is this, Brack?" Fishe bellowed. He picked the papers up from the floor and balled them up, seemingly about to throw them again. "Have a good day, dear/ enjoy your turkey/and try to forget/that life is murky. *That life is murky?* What damned kind of Thanksgiving poem is that?"

"It seemed appropriate."

"Appropriate! And soon will come Christmas/that season of fear/we'll celebrate Christmas/and pretend that it's cheer." Fishe threw the pages violently at the wall. "What the hell kind of stuff is this, Brack? Do you think I'm crazy here?" His large face reddened and seemed to swell. "You playing jokes on me?"

I hate him, Brack said to himself with awed discovery. *I hate him more than I ever hated him and if I had the guts I'd kill him.* To Fishe he said only, "No jokes. I just thought—"

"You didn't think! Now you listen to me, Brack," Fishe said, modulating his tone, sitting down abruptly in his chair and with a terrifying switch of mood, putting his feet on the desk, "because this is the last time. Ever since I came in here two years ago to straighten out this place there's been one writer here who's been giving me trouble. And that writer, Brack, is you. Everybody else does their job, writes their material; gets it through.

"But not you, Brack. You seem to think you're some kind of origi-

nal. A *poet*. Well, let's get something straight. I'm through with these discussions of ours. You haven't written a decent verse in months and I can't carry you any more. I'm going to Elson this morning and recommend your dismissal."

Brack gasped. "Listen, I'll admit I've been a bit depressed lately, but—"

"But nothing. I don't care what you are. You're a forty-year-old man with the mind of a thirteen-year-old. I can't work with you any more, Brack and I can't improve this department as long as you're here. It's you or me, so it's going to be you. I've been keeping Elson up to date on your activities and I'm sure he'll go along with me."

Fishe leaned forward, stared coldly at Brack. "But, I'm a decent man. So, I'll give you a chance. Resign. Resign and I'll let this drop; resign and we'll put your notice through just as if nothing's wrong. Resign and I won't bother you anymore. Otherwise it's out on your tail this afternoon."

"But I can't. I just can't," Brack stammered.

"Oh yes you can."

"I'll never get another job," Brack said desperately. "I'm forty-two, Fishe, and I've been writing these verses since I got out of college. Who else would take me? I'll get a bad recommendation and never get back into this field. It's a tight field. Don't you understand?"

"Certainly I do," Fishe said grandly, "and I say that that's your problem. I didn't make you turn out this way. *You* did. Now, yes or no. Do you resign?"

"Look, Fishe, have a heart. I—"

"Okay," Fishe said, standing. "That's it. I tried to be generous but you don't want it that way. So it's in to the boss. Back to your desk."

I could kill him; I could kill him, Brack muttered to himself and the voice whispered back: *You couldn't you couldn't, you don't have the guts to do it cold and he knows it.* But all Brack said very quietly and after a long pause was, "All right, Fishe. I resign."

"Ah."

"I offer six—no, ten weeks notice."

"Two is sufficient," Fishe said dryly, sitting and beginning to put marks on his desk calendar. "That would make your last day the twelfth. Yes, the twelfth."

"Just two weeks?"

"Two. I accept your resignation, Brack. May twelfth is your terminal date."

"But I don't know."

"You don't know what? Do I take it, Brack, or don't I?"

"Yes," Brack said weakly, dodging the terrible stare. "Oh God yes. Yes." *I could kill you; you know that?*

"Well," Fishe said, with a smile that began slowly in his eyes and spread down his cheeks as if knifed in, "I'm truly sorry to hear that, Al-

bert. I really am. I wish you every success."

"May I go back to my desk, now?" *You know I could kill you, don't you? You know it. But you don't even care. You don't believe that I could do it.*

"Certainly, Albert. I'll have to go in to Mr. Elson and break this sad news to him right away. I wouldn't be surprised if there was a little gift for you, Albert; a very nice little gift."

Brack found himself wavering uncertainly in an iron grasp, found himself half led, half dragged to the door of the office. As Fishe opened it and began to ease him out, they exchanged one quick cold glance and Brack looked deep into the man's eyes: *My God,* he thought, *he knows it; he does see it. He knows that I want to kill him. I do have the strength, he sees it.* The insight made him gasp.

But Fishe said only, "Write me some good verses now, Albert," and closed the door upon him. In the stunned moment outside that door, Brack heard a lock click and the sound of wild laughter.

He stumbled back to his desk, sat there and putting his head in his hands, looked numbly at the floor. *I'll do it,* he swore, *by God, I'll do it and he knows it. I will, I will, I will! He does, he does, he does!*

And then he remembered his appointment with Al. With unreasonable excitement he muttered, *I'll just walk out at two-thirty and go over to see him. It doesn't matter any more. I don't have to be afraid of Fishe. He's finished me.*

At five minutes to three, Albert Brack walked into the old building at 452 Park Street, ignored the dismal freight elevator and climbed the wooden staircase to the mezzanine, hesitating before a shabby room which said *111.* Then he shrugged and walked in. The room was tiny, airless, and with the exception of a small man seated behind a battered desk, empty. There was a chair next to the desk and the man motioned him to sit there.

"Are you Al?" Brack said.

"My name is Alfredi. They find it easier in the newspaper to merely say Al; it saves space and seems less threatening. Good afternoon, Mr. Brack."

"Seems less threatening?"

"Mr. Brack," Alfredi said, leaning forward and tapping the desk, "pardon my abruptness but I prefer to get right to business. There is little time to waste here and a huge overhead. So let me recapitulate.

"Your name is Albert Brack. You are forty-two years old and presently a potential assassin. A writer of greeting cards, your self-contained, lonely and pointless existence was at least tenable until two years ago last March, at which time a fat man named Robert Fishe came to your firm as copy chief and as your superior.

"Since then, Fishe has terrorized

you, insulted you, degraded you and caused your limited ability to fall off to the point of sheer incompetence. Protest is hopeless because Fishe is your only connection to Elson, who is the firm's president, and to compound your dilemma is a fact of which you are not aware: Fishe is Elson's son-in-law, who was given this position when he failed in his own business.

"You feel wholly trapped, Brack, and you are in physical terror of Fishe, who, like all cowards, is a bully. Your life is a smashed shell and because you are too limited to cope with your situation and too frightened to leave it you have only one hope left: that of murder. But you are not ready to commit that murder yourself, for you, by all instinct, are a coward also. So you have turned to our service. And that explains everything."

"But you know all about me!"

"Our business is to know all about our customers and our research department is very competent. Hence our overhead. Now, to get right to the point, Brack: you have come here in the hope that we can arrange Fishe's murder for you. You have reasoned in your conscious or subconscious mind that our service is murder. You are fortunate, Mr. Brack, and you are quite correct. You are in the right place. We are prepared to eliminate Mr. Fishe for you."

"But—this is all going too fast. It's too fast for me. Who are you, Alfredi? What's going on? Murder? I don't know about murder."

Alfredi sighed a massive sigh. "All of you are the same. Each of you convinced that the case is individual, but are always the same. Well, let us be ruthless and practical here and remember that my time is precious.

"We can arrange disposition of your Mr. Fishe for a modest fee and we can guarantee that your hands will remain clean. Our field staff has checked Fishe's credentials and we agree that this is a man worth eliminating, not only because of the suffering caused you—you, after all, are a born victim, Brack—but because of that which he brings upon his wife and his father-in-law, who he is successfully bullying to an early grave after having cajoled him into willing over the business to Fishe. Our field supervisor agrees that removal is justified."

Alfredi checked his fingernails and blew on them. "Completely justified. All that we must do here is arrange terms."

"But look," Brack said, "I just walked in from the street. How can you trust me? How do you know I won't go to the police and—"

Alfredi chuckled, sounding for a terrifying moment exactly like Fishe.

"Come, come, Brack," he said. "A man like you has read enough crime fiction to have outgrown such thoughts. We know our cus-

tomers well—and we also have no location. Today I sit at four-fifty two Park Street, using an unconverted storage room, tomorrow—well, who knows?"

He lit a cigarette with a flourish. "The police can hardly be concerned with rumors carried by people like you. Now to come to the point, Brack, we are an agency and we work on a contract basis. When Fishe dies it is entirely likely, according to our researchers, that you will inherit his job. You are experienced, you know, and had there been no Fishe you might have acceded at the time he came. We will ask a fee entailing seventy-five per cent of your first year's salary in your new position or fifty per cent of your first year's salary from this date if you are not promoted."

"That's outrageous!"

"Is it? Consider the alternative. What will you do unless we move in? Fishe will get around to firing you soon enough and then, where will you go?"

Brack quivered. "He did fire me."

"Ah," said Alfredi seriously, "then that explains even more. Well, Brack? What say? You live in a furnished room; your only indulgences are two newspapers on Sunday. You are unmarried and without close relatives and you have a savings account balance of eight thousand dollars and thirty-one cents. Consider all of this an investment in your future."

Alfredi opened his desk, extracted two densely-printed forms and initialed them rapidly.

"Sign here, please," he said. "One copy is yours. The other is for our files. Your first payment will be due on June fifteenth, one and a half months from today. We allow a short grace period."

Mechanically, unthinking, Brack took the pen and signed. Alfredi beamed. "Thank you," he said. That is all. Many thanks for your interest in our agency as well."

"Is that all?" Brack said, folding his copy and putting it in his wallet. "Is that all?"

"That's all. No, Mr. Brack, please return your copy to me. It is obviously a document which we would not want on your person for

a time. We will mail it to you after our services have been completed and along with your first bill."

Brack handed the paper back. "You mean, there's nothing more to it?"

Alfredi put the paper away, stared at him coldly. "What else would there be, Brack? This is a business office, not a counseling service. Go home and await developments. Thank you and good-by."

"Good-by," Brack said hesitantly.

My God, I'm a murderer, Brack mumbled, walking down the stairs, *Fishe was right: he saw it first. I'm a murderer!* By the time he had come to the street it was a litany: *I'm a murderer; I'm a murderer!* he chanted, looking for a taxicab. *I did it, I did it! I did it!* He never saw what hit him.

The taxi came toward him at a high rate of speed. Instead of easing to a stop it seemed to be going even faster and the driver, head bent over the wheel showed no consciousness of Brack's presence. The car swerved, engaged Brack as Brack stepped off the curb and then, catching him casually on its right bumper, flung him seven feet in the air, caught him neatly on the rebound; knocking him into a streetlamp, it caved in his skull.

As he came to the pavement for the last time, Brack's impressions were wholly amazed; he heard running and the bellows of the cab driver who screamed: *He walked right into me; the guy walked right into me.* Brack opened his mouth to say *no, no,* but it was late; it was far, far too late and after a moment, past the shouting, he heard nothing more at all.

Standing at the window, looking at all of it sadly, Alfredi gave a delicate shrug and extinguished his cigarette. He had seen it already too many times; it meant nothing to him. Perhaps having no capacity for response was inhuman but it was a job; that was all it was, a job. You put it away at night and went home to your family. He sighed.

When all of it was over—the taxi driver being led off by the police, evidently for a routine statement, the crowd dispersed, the ambulance driven off slowly—he picked up the phone, dialed a number and asked for a party. Eventually, his party came on.

"Well?" it said.

"Done," said Alfredi. "All done. The works. Everything on schedule. I doubt if he would ever have understood what happened to him."

"He's dead?"

"The case is closed," said Alfredi.

"Fine. Then I was right?"

"You were right," Alfredi said quietly. "The firing this morning precipitated things just like you thought it would. It brought everything to a head. Yes, Mr. Fishe, he would have killed you. Maybe sooner, maybe later. But he had

the murderer's touch. He would have done it."

"I thought so. Well, I'm very glad that it's taken care of. That takes a load off my mind."

"Of course. Our agency fee is due and payable to us now, of course."

"Of course. I'll have a check for you by June 1st."

"Not June 1st, Mr. Fishe. Not May fifteenth. *Now*. Right now. We allow no grace period here."

"Now?"

"Today. Of course, if you object, we can send one of our special adjusters out to discuss the matter personally."

"Oh no," Fishe said hastily. "No, no, no. I'll put it right in the mail today. Right now."

"That's fine. The fee is five hundred dollars."

"I know that. I'll send it right off. Please don't send anyone around. My wife—"

Alfredi smiled. "Very well, Mr. Fishe. We'll look forward to payment in the mail soon then. Good-by."

"Good-by, Alfredi."

Alfredi hung up, permitted himself one final sigh and looked out the window to note that things on the street were already back to normal. It was time for his cigar. He lit it with contentment, deciding that his little agency was profitable enough—not as profitable as it might be if it were an assassination bureau proper but certainly good enough for an organization which did no more than locate potential murderers for their fearful potential victims and verify their motives.

It was safe, too. He had started small but prospects were getting better all of the time. Someday, Alfredi decided, he might even be able to graduate into the assassination bureau business, proper. It was a worthwhile goal, anyway.

A while after that, the taxi driver called to say that he was all clear with the cops and that he had dropped over to Fishe, who had given him not only his fee but Alfredi's. He asked if he could come over to deliver it. Alfredi said that any time before five that day would be fine.

ALWAYS A NEW COMPLETE SOLO AND KURYAKIN NOVEL EVERY ISSUE

ESCAPE

Too long had he lived in his private hell, kept there by a woman. It was time to get out—and put her there instead!

by MARGARET LoMONACO GIACALONE

SIMON PRESSED his palms tightly against his ears but it didn't help. Nothing could stop Hetty's screechings from jarring every nerve ending in his body, nothing but getting rid of her. Permanently.

She was screaming with enough lung power to launch a rocket ship. "Simon, how many times must I tell you not to leave your blasted tools lying around? Do you expect me to pick up after you?"

Compressing his lips, Simon picked up the offending drill, skirted his wife, who was tapping a foot, arms crossed firmly against her flat chest, and returned the tool to his basement workshop.

After twenty-eight years of life

with Hetty even hell seemed more inviting. But why take either Hetty or hell when murder would free him?

He had taken enough of Hetty's naggings, naggings which in his courting days he'd stupidly thought of as coaxing little ways.

As a bride she'd wailed and cried whenever he'd suggested leaving her for a weekend fishing trip with the boys. Made to feel guilty, he waited till the birth of their first child before mentioning the trips again. Having little Esther for company, Hetty shouldn't mind. She did.

"How can you think of leaving me with the baby and all that work while you go off to enjoy yourself?" she'd accuse, letting the tears of self-pity flow.

It wasn't until after Simon, Jr., was born that Simon decided to change tactics.

"Be firm," he told himself. "Make plans and go. Period. Don't let her order you around."

Hetty was no fool, however. She recognized the determination in his eyes and matched it.

"You just go, Simon Schwartz," she had warned grimly, "and you'll be sorry." It was the first time she'd challenged him so defiantly.

Simon had gone, and true enough the pleasure had hardly been worth the price Hetty had made him pay. For a week afterwards she nagged him incessantly and refused to cook his meals. In the end he had had to fly the flag of defeat.

The situation worsened over the years. Even a night out with the boys for a game of cards became more and more difficult to manage. How could he compete with the devil who would communicate his thoughts to Hetty before he could even open his mouth? She'd develop a sudden illness, remember an urgent task which had to be done, or just start ranting about his family responsibilities.

If he did get out, her persistent nagging before and after was so wearying that Simon gradually dropped his outside interests and withdrew to the solitude of his workshop.

Those coaxing little ways had transformed him through the long years of their marriage until he'd become Hetty's robot.

The children hardly fared better. Hetty nagged, tormented, scolded without respite, almost always beginning or ending with a sniffly, "You don't appreciate all I do for you," or an irate, "How many times—"

Luckily, Simon, Jr., had the temperament that could usually shrug off the avalanche of tongue lashings, but the thin, sensitive Esther recoiled whenever the verbal attacks were directed at her. She all but merged with her shadow when her mother cruelly reminded her, "Look at you. You're so scrawny you make me ashamed of

you. People'll think I don't feed you; I don't care."

As Esther grew older the chant became, "You'll be an old maid if you don't eat and gain some weight."

Despite her mother's dire predictions, Esther found herself a young man. She was only eighteen then. Simon recalled clearly the summer day Esther told her mother she was going to get married. They were in the dining room and Simon, unknown to them, was weeding beneath the screened windows.

"Marriage!" Hetty had shouted astounded. "You're still a child. You still need my advice. Do you think wedding bells ring forever?"

"They could, Mother, if we both work at it," Esther had answered quietly. "I'm not having you tell me what to do and what not to do any more. I feel sorry for the way you've pushed Daddy around. He has no escape but I have and I'm taking it."

Hetty was in turn vexed, furious and frustrated before Esther's unyielding stand, and in the end it was Hetty who had to relent and acquiesce to the marriage.

To everyone's amazement but her father's, the frail young woman blossomed away from her mother's tyranny and domination; the ugly duckling filled out to become the pretty swan. Simon was overjoyed but he suspected his wife was secretly dismayed that she could not taunt their daughter with "I told you do." It was a complete victory for little Esther.

Two years later Simon, Jr., married, leaving Simon to suffer the full onslaught of Hetty's tirades and nagging complaints. He took to escaping to Esther's whenever he could contrive an excuse. There was a tacit understanding between father and daughter. Simon's hunger for peace and contentment was satisfied only in Esther's home. Not even his grandson's occasional crying spells would grate him as did most noise above conversational tone. To him the crying was like the laughter of angels.

Unfortunately, Simon's escape was generally short-lived. The telephone made Hetty almost omnipresent. It was not unusual for her to phone to remind him it was time to come home.

"Don't make a nuisance of yourself," she'd enjoin him tartly. "Your daughter has more important things to do besides entertain you."

With a resigned sigh, Simon would kiss Esther and the baby, bid her husband good night, and leave. "Come home," Hetty would say. Home to what—reproaches, laments, four cheerless walls?

How could he have been so cursed with a domineering, selfish woman? He couldn't admit, even to himself, that the blame might be his. But if he'd been weak and yielding in the past, he must

now be strong and firm to regain his long-lost freedom, his manhood, his pride. Hetty was a useless, gangrenous limb which had to be cut off. He'd make her death look like an accident—one of those common, every day accidents, like a fall down a stairs.

Simon was confidently waiting for the right moment to put his plan into action. Hetty had already told him twice that the hall window was stuck. He knew that the third reminder was imminent and it came the following day as he was watering his property line flowers and exchanging small talk with his neighbor.

"Simon," Hetty yelled shrilly from the bathroom window, "How many times must I tell you about the hall window?"

"I'll take care of it right after lunch," her husband promised meekly. He was glad the neighbor had overheard. During the routine investigation the neighbor's repetition of the brief conversation would strengthen his own story and allay suspicion.

Simon carried his tool chest upstairs. Even when he had to drive a single nail the tool chest came along. This time it was part of his plan. As soon as he had fixed the window he carefully set the chest on the upstairs landing next to the window. That, too, was part of the plan.

"The window works fine, now," Simon informed his wife when he came down. "You can see for yourself when you go up."

"Humph," Hetty sneered, "it's about time."

Simon hovered around restlessly, impatient for Hetty to go up so he could be done with the obnoxious job. The release couldn't come too soon. What blissful peace to be alone, undisturbed, without the overbearing Hetty. Esther wouldn't have to feel sorry for him anymore. Like her, he'd soon have an escape.

At last Hetty was going up. Simon followed. She put away some ironed clothing and then with her hands free came to examine the window.

Grudgingly snorting an approval, Hetty turned to go down. Simon drew in his breath. It was time. An energetic push and it would be all over. The explanation afterwards would be so simple. "Poor Hetty fell over my tool box."

Simon raised his arms the split second Hetty whirled around towards him angrily, her body missing his murderous thrust by scant inches.

"Simon, how many times must I tell you—"

Simon was already hurtling down the hard, uncarpeted stairs but before he landed in a broken, bloody heap at the bottom he knew the unfinished words interrupted by her piercing scream would have been "—not to leave your blasted tools lying around!"

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